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FRANKAU

THE MAN AND HIS WORK

Gilbert Frankau—pronounced FRANKŌ—was born on April 21st, 1884: the eldest son of Arthur and Julia Frankau (Frank Danby, the novelist).

Educated at Eton as an Oppidan Scholar, he there founded *The X Magazine*, subsequently producing his first volume of verse, *Eton Echoes*, in 1901.

Entering his father's business in 1904, after two years' apprenticeship on the Continent, he remained a cigar merchant and cigarette manufacturer until the Great War. During this period he produced another volume of verse, *The X.Y.Z. of Bridge*, and in 1912 his famous verse satire, *One of Us*.

A business journey round the world gave us the dramatic poem, *Tid' apa*.

From the outbreak of war until he was invalided in February 1918, Frankau served as an infantryman (9th Battalion East Surrey Regiment), as a gunner (107th Brigade R.F.A.) and as propaganda officer in Italy. His soldier poems enjoyed wide popularity and are collected in the two volumes, *The City of Fear* and *The Judgement of Valhalla*.

Frankau's first prose novel, *The Woman of the Horizon*, in which he originally created the character "Peter Jackson", was published while he was still serving. *Peter Jackson, Cigar Merchant*, followed in 1919.

Meanwhile he had given us the second of his verse satires, *One of Them*, originally published in *The Tatler*.

By then the family business had passed into other hands, and Frankau took up authorship and journalism as a career.

Readers will recall the following novels: *The Seeds of Enchantment* (1921), *The Love Story of Aliette Brunton* (1922), *Gerald Cranston's Lady* (1924), *Life - and Erica* (1925), and *Masterson* (1926).

In that year Frankau went to America. His impressions,

FRANKAU: THE MAN AND HIS WORK

Originally published in the *Morning Post*, are to be found in *My Unsentimental Journey*.

After the publication of the novel, *So Much Good* (1928), and an adventure in Fleet Street, came the prose satire, *Dance! Little Gentleman*, and the novels, *Martin Make-believe* (1930), *Christopher Strong* (1932), *The Lonely Man* (1932), *Everywoman* (1933), *Three Englishmen* (1935), and *Farewell Romance* (1936).

During the year, 1937, Frankau gave us his third verse satire, *More of Us*, and his sixth collection of short stories, *Experiments in Crime*.

The remainder of his short stories are collected under the titles, *Men, Maids and Mustard-Pot* (1924), *Twelve Tales* (1927), *Concerning Peter Jackson and Others* (1931), *Wine, Women and Waiters* (1932), and *Secret Services* (1934).

The Dangerous Years is to be followed during the spring of 1938 by Frankau's seventeenth prose novel on which he is now at work, but for which he has not yet chosen a title.

THE DANGEROUS YEARS

The
DANGEROUS YEARS
A Trilogy

BY
GILBERT FRANKAU



1938
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■

TO
MY GRANDSON
TIMOTHY D'ARCH SM.

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■

BOOK ONE

PRE-WAR

■

THE DANGEROUS YEARS

CHAPTER ONE

§ 1

"I THINK I'll just stretch the old legs on deck before I turn in", said John Carteret. "Would either of you care to come with me?"

"Not for a farm. This is the coldest trip I ever remember", answered Aurelia Vansuythen in her soft Philadelphian. "Besides, I ought to take another peep at Mercy. Nurse imagines she may be starting a temperaturc."

"Nurses are always a bit panicky. What about you, Charlotte?"

"All right. Just give me time to get a fur. And you'd better have a coat."

Lady Carteret closed her book and got up from the sofa. Sir John rose too. But he did not accompany her from the saloon.

"How English", thought Aurelia, rolling up her tapestry work. "An American husband would have fetched her coat."

She looked at the clock; saw that it was just after ten, and wondered how much longer Dwight would be over his game. Dwight was too young to play such steep poker. If he were her son, she wouldn't allow it. But one had no control over brothers.

"If you'll excuse me", she said; and she also left the saloon.

John Carteret's brown eyes followed her. "Plain woman", he thought. "But a nice one. Gentlefolk, the Vansuythens. Glad I've decided to sell them that land in the Radnor country."

He took his heavy silver cigarette case from the hip pocket of his dinner clothes, and twisted it in his mottled hands.

By the time he made up his mind that he had been smoking too much ever since they came on board at Southampton, his wife was beckoning to him from the doorway.

A lovely creature, his Charlotte. Always looked her best in those sables. Pity she'd insisted on coming away without any of her jewellery. Nothing like pearls and diamonds to set off a woman's neck and shoulders.

Checking his thoughts, which seemed a little too sensual especially on a Sunday - he went out to her. Despite the new-fangled American heating on this ship, the air in the companionway outside the saloon chilled him. He was glad to twist the woollen muffler round his bull neck and shrug his stocky body into the heavy cloth coat his wife held up for him.

"Your cap's in the left-hand pocket, dear."

He thanked her, a little gruffly and a little awkwardly, as he pulled the check tweed cap over the rusty brown hair, already gray at the temples, of his bullet head.

The lift - another new-fangled idea - was just taking a full complement of their fellow passengers down to their cabins. Only one man waved good night from the descending cage - for the Carterets had not made many steamer acquaintances.

"It was always so difficult", said John, "to know who people were."

He said more or less the same thing as the lift disappeared and a passing steward in a white jacket opened the door on to the promenade deck. Charlotte thought, vaguely, "I wish he wouldn't repeat himself quite so much". Still, there were many worse husbands than John. And anyway, after eighteen years of marriage - "to the same man", suggested a gleam of malicious humour - it seemed a little late to begin finding fault.

On deck, the wind of their way blew icy, but the sea - except where their sides churned it - was absolutely calm. Even John's lack of imagination responded to the amazing brilliance of the stars.

"Never seen anything quite like this", he said.

"Neither have I."

Braving the cold, they walked to the rail and stood still

for a moment. From the second-class saloon aft came the notes of a piano, then voices.

"Hymns", said John. "Queer idea to choose that one."

His lips framed the words, "O hear us when we cry to Thee, for those in peril on the sea". The hymn ended. Presently the voices broke into God Save the King. Automatically John stiffened to attention.

"Ought to have taken off my cap", he laughed. "But it's too much like winter for that. Funny, we should have it quite so bitter in April."

"I'm getting absolutely frozen. Let's walk."

They began to pace the deck, which was completely deserted.

"I'm afraid", said John suddenly, "that religion's going out a bit."

Charlotte wanted to say, "That's only because people have begun to think for themselves nowadays"; but forbore.

John was Church of England both by inheritance and conviction. He had been to service this morning. He would go in Philadelphia. She wouldn't. At home one had to—if only for the example. But not abroad.

"Great pity", went on John. "I believe that's one reason why there's so much unrest about."

He spoke of the recent coal strike, and the cancellation of "our new king's" visit to Belgium; continuing:

"Heaven knows I'm a good liberal, Charlotte. Fellows ought to have decent wages. But when it comes to disorder . . . And sedition . . . Take this chap Tom Mann for instance—he calls himself a syndicalist, whatever that may mean—actually inciting our soldiers to mutiny. I'd give him seven years hard labour."

"And what about the suffragettes?" put in Charlotte, her humour unable to resist temptation.

"Haven't we agreed to differ about that." He stopped, scratching at his moustache—another habit which the years had made familiar. "You've got your opinions and I've got mine. You're not a militant, that's one comfort."

"Are you sure you wouldn't like to have me locked up? Just occasionally."

"What nonsense you can talk. It's lucky the children can't

hear you. Especially Elizabeth. I hope they're getting on all right without us. Perhaps I oughtn't to have dragged you away from them."

"How unmodern you are, John. Why, even here, we're not out of touch with the Manor. If anything went wrong Miss Marston could always send us a marconigram."

"That's true. I seem to be getting a regular old fusspot. Serves you right for not marrying a man of your own age, my dear."

"Who's talking nonsense now?"

Impulsively--and it was rare for her, nowadays, to be impulsive--Charlotte Carteret slipped a hand through her husband's arm.

"You're only just fifty", she upbraided him. "And you've never had a day's illness in your life."

"But I've had to give up hunting."

"I had to?"

"Well--I admit I never was in your class as a horseman." And again John laughed, a trifle shamefacedly, when Charlotte said, "If you expect to be treated as a man in his declining years just because you find a saddle too slippery, I refuse to play".

They walked on for a full minute without speaking.

"I wonder if that was a little unkind of me", thought Charlotte. "Any man's riding nerve can go. Except on a horse, John's got far more pluck than I have. I wouldn't have dived off that high board last summer for a farm, as Aurelia says. And it was only for my sake and the children's he didn't go to South Africa."

South Africa. The Boer War. What a long time ago it seemed since John had said, "Of course they'll take married men, my dear. And men of forty, if they've a bit of influence. That's not the trouble. The trouble is that I've got to think of my duty to you, and Johnny, and Philip, and Elizabeth".

Typical of John, that. And so right. One had to do one's duty. In that state of life . . .

Only sometimes one . . . faltered.

"Twelve years", Charlotte Carteret said to herself. "As

long ago as that. So what's the use of even thinking about it?"

Aloud she said, "I've had nearly enough. What about you, dear?"

John answered, "Another ten minutes, I think. But don't you stay with me if you're feeling chilly. Run along and get undressed".

§ 2

Charlotte Carteret did not wait for the lift. Cheeks tingling, she took the rubber carpeted stairs two at a time; and went straight to Aurelia's stateroom, knocking and asking, "Can I come in?"

Aurelia was still in her evening dress. "I'm a little worried", she admitted in answer to Charlotte's inquiry about Mercy. "Last time nurse took the temperature it was over a hundred and one. She's asleep for the moment though. So perhaps it'll be all right by morning. If not, I suppose I'll have to get the doctor for her."

They talked for a minute or so longer before saying good night.

As she made her way past a stewardess still on duty to the door of the big stateroom she shared with John, it seemed to Charlotte that the corridor tilted, ever so slightly, under her feet. She was vaguely conscious, too, of an increased vibration when, once through the door, she sat down to take off her shoes, and stood up again—hands behind her—to unhook her dress.

She mentioned this to John, who came in just as she finished brushing her teeth.

"I expect they're pushing her a bit", he said. "If we do another five hundred and forty-six tomorrow we ought to dock by Tuesday night. And that reminds me, I really must fill in that baggage-declaration form. Now where the dickens did I put it?"

"In your pocket book, dear."

"Why, so I did."

He took out his heavy morocco-leather pocket book;

extracted the form; put on his glasses, and plumped himself down on the one armchair. When she returned from the bathroom along the corridor he was sitting at the little table, fountain pen in hand.

"Do you mind if I have a last cigarette?" he asked.

He had asked the same question for eighteen years. She gave him the customary answer. He lit up. By the time she took her book and climbed into her narrow brass bed, the sweet sickly smoke of Turkish tobacco seemed to fill the entire cabin. If only she could have the porthole opened. But it was too cold for that.

John finished his slow conscientious work on the declaration form; signed with his usual care; screwed the cap on his pen, and asked—as also for eighteen years:

"Interesting book?"

"Not very. At least to me. I don't much care for these younger novelists."

"Then why read 'em?"

"Just to keep up to date."

John, who could never be induced to read a book ("*The Times*", he always said, "was enough for him") rose and peeled off his dinner jacket. She resumed reading. But tonight she found it difficult to hold the book steady. The mattress seemed to be joggling her elbow.

"They must be pushing her", she said suddenly. "I can actually feel it."

"Good for them." John unbuttoned and threw back his braces. "If we don't get in early enough to catch a train for Philadelphia and have to spend the night in New York it'll cost us a bit extra."

He undid his tie, and unstudded the high old-fashioned collar. This—also according to habit—he inspected carefully before he put it away in a drawer.

"That'll make its third night", said Charlotte.

"No point in wasting money."

"So funny of him", she thought. For although John was always so careful about money—even over such little points as the laundry book—one couldn't call him mean. Johnny's new gun, for instance, had cost as much as the evening frock

she had just taken off—forty guineas. And he'd paid double that for Elizabeth's new pony.

A funny man altogether, her John. But she'd always managed to keep him happy. Easy enough, that. One only had to give in, and—very occasionally—keep things from him.

Particularly one thing !

§ 3

The train of Charlotte's thoughts broke. She realised that John had finished his toilet ; was shrugging his big shoulders into the coat of his heavy silk pyjamas. On the way to get his dressing gown from the hook behind the door, he stopped at the little table and picked up a leather-framed photograph—the last one taken of their children. This, putting on his glasses again, he inspected for quite a little time before saying :

"Johnny gets more like me every day. I wish he'd inherited your looks and your height. Elizabeth's a regular little rolpoly. But I expect that's only puppy fat. Philip's going to be taller than either of 'em. The youngster's shooting up, too. He looks more like twelve than ten and a half. Pity he didn't get a better report. But I suppose that's a bit too much to ask of our Maurice. He'll be captain of the second eleven next term, your mother tells me. I wish John or Philip had a chance for their flannels".

Then he put down the photograph, put on his dressing gown, wound his watch, and knelt by the other bed to say his prayers.

Tonight John's prayers—as always on a Sunday—took him an extra half-minute. "Habit?" Charlotte mused, watching him. "No. I don't think so. John really does believe that there's a God listening to him. If only I could !"

But there again the train of thought broke, leaving her only with a vague discomfort and the inevitable certainty that, although this man she had married might not be of a great intelligence, or even greatly companionable, he had always merited—and increasingly as the passing years made his character plainer and plainer to her understanding—a great respect.

"So perhaps", she suspected, "I really am growing to love

him." And, when he rose from his knees, this new suspicion increased.

As always he came straight from prayer to the side of her bed. As always, when he stooped to kiss her, she was aware of those two scents—Turkish tobacco and peppermint tooth-paste—which clung about his moustache. But tonight those scents, and the scratch of hair against her lips, did not offend her. Impulsively she opened her arms to him; and they kissed again.

"Are you sleepy?" she asked.

"Not very."

"Then sit down and talk to me for a little. What time is it?"

"Just about half-past eleven." He sat down on the side of the bed. "Is there anything in particular you want to talk to me about?"

"No." She hesitated. "At least, I don't think so. John"—one of her strong white hands came to rest, very slowly, on his knee—"have I been a good wife to you?"

Her question surprised him. He laid stubby fingers over hers.

"Well?" she asked.

"The very best", he answered; and, looking at her, he thought, once again, what a lovely creature she was, lying there with her long light-brown hair plaited for the night, and her big blue eyes just a little softer than their habit, and her lips half-parted as though she had more questions to ask.

But Charlotte lay silent for a considerable moment before she asked, her right hand tightening on his knee, "You really mean that? You wouldn't have liked me to be different?"

She had him a little out of his depth by then—and knew it, without that thoughtful, "Different. I don't quite understand".

"Perhaps I ought to have said, 'More old-fashioned'", she went on. "Less emancipated. But of course I was always that. If I hadn't married you I should have gone to Girton."

That, too, he thought over.

"I doubt it", he said at last.

"Why?"

"You were far too beautiful. If I hadn't snapped you up before you were eighteen, somebody else would."

"And now?"

"You're more beautiful than ever." A rare passion flushed his lined cheeks. His voice shook.

Pleased with the tribute, she lay silent again.

"Charlotte!"

He leaned forward. His free hand touched her shoulder.

"No, John. It's so late. Just kiss me again."

His fingers relaxed their grip. He rose; kissed her for the third time; said, "Good night, my dear. God bless you", and climbed into his own bed.

■

CHAPTER TWO

§ 1

JOHN clicked off the bracket light above their two beds ; turned over on his right side ; gave one yawn, and settled himself on his pillow. Motionless, Charlotte listened for the regular breathing which would tell her that he slept.

The stateroom was not quite dark. A gray shadow outlined the curtain over the porthole. Three tiny slits of yellow marked the ventilator above the door. Closing her eyes, she was aware of a little more noise, a little more movement than usual.

This mattress—she felt—wanted to sway. Every now and again, brass clinked against brass. The regular pulse of the engines seemed to have accelerated its beat.

She dismissed these trivialities from her mind. John was asleep now. She could indulge her thoughts of him freely. Queer, the sensation of freedom one always had in this particular moment. Did other wives have it ? Men too ?

A line of poetry flickered through her recollection. Some words about "watching over one's loved one while he slept". She had never wanted to do that. *Never*. Queer again. Perhaps she wasn't quite normal. But was anybody quite normal ? Take John, for instance.

"Subnormal", suggested the malicious humour that always lurked in the background of her mind ; and soon consciousness waned, wavered ; soon, she felt her mind sliding across the border into dreamland . . .

What could have brought consciousness back ?

Eyes still closed, she remembered something like a hand striking up at her, only very softly, through the mattress ; while another hand had jerked, even more softly, at her pillow.

"Imagination", she thought.

Then something fell—or was that also in her imagination?—and the hands seemed to strike again, a little harder this time, one at her right ear drum, the other just below her waist.

With an effort, she opened her eyes; lifted herself to one elbow. The light from the ventilator, reflected from a matt surface lying face upwards on the dark carpet, showed her what must have fallen—the framed photograph John had looked at just before he put on his dressing gown.

How careless of John. He must have left it too near the edge of the table. Lucky there was no glass to break. Just talc.

Charlotte let herself back to the pillow, thinking, "I ought to get out of bed and pick it up. But that might disturb him. Besides, I'm too comfortable". She closed her eyes once more, pleasantly aware that the mattress no longer joggled and of the regular pulse and throb of the engines.

The usual beat. So perhaps they weren't pushing the ship any more. So much the better. One would sleep all the sounder.

Only—was this the usual beat? It seemed slower. Distinctly slower. Could they be stopping the engines?

They *had* stopped the engines . . . This silence . . . This extraordinary silence.

Charlotte Carteret's eyes snapped open again. Again, and quickly, she lifted herself on her elbow.

"What a shame", she thought, "to wake John from his beauty sleep."

All the same, her hand reached up for the switch.

§ 2

John did not wake at once. When he did, Charlotte could see his eye muscles contracting in their efforts to shut out the light. She hesitated another moment or so. Except for the extraordinary silence, there seemed no real reason for having disturbed him.

Eventually, however, she called his name; and he sat up, blinking, and grumbling, "What on earth's the matter?"

She said, feeling rather stupid, "I don't know. Perhaps

there's been an accident in the engine room. Anyway, they've stopped".

It took John an appreciable moment to grasp what she was telling him. As on the very few other occasions when she had woken him, his first action was to look at his watch.

"Getting on for midnight", he said. "Funny time to stop 'em."

"And that photograph fell over. Look."

John put his watch down and craned forward.

"Funny", he repeated. "I wonder how that happened."

"You probably put it too near the edge of the table."

"I must have. How silly of me. I suppose I'd better pick it up."

He got out of bed and replaced the photograph.

"It's colder than ever", he grumbled. "I shouldn't be surprised if there were ice about. I wonder how soon they'll get the engines going. I've never known this happen before. I think I'll ring for the night steward. He may know something."

"Hadn't you better put on your dressing gown?"

"Yes. I think I will."

He shrugged himself into his thick dressing gown; laid a finger on the bell push. Soon, Jenkins, their night steward, knocked and came bulkily through the door.

"I don't think it can be anything much, Sir John", he said. "Otherwise we'd have had orders about it. If I was you, I'd just get back into bed."

The man saluted and went out, closing the door behind him. John stood irresolute.

"Seems all right", he said at last.

"You don't think"—Charlotte's imagination had just begun to work—"that we could have hit something?"

"I don't see how that's possible. If there'd been a collision, Jenkins would know about it. Besides, there'd have been some kind of a crash. Not frightened, are you, my dear?"

"No. At least, I don't think so. But one can't help being just a little nervous."

"There's no need for that on this ship. She's unsinkable. Watertight doors and that sort of thing all over the place. They can actually shut 'em off from the bridge. By electricity."

"How do you know?"

"Read it in *The Illustrated London News*, my dear. They had quite a long article about her." And John, throwing off his dressing gown, climbed back into bed; put up a hand to the switch.

"Please don't", said Charlotte, speaking a little sharply.

"Why ever not?"

"I don't know. Only I'd rather you didn't."

"Very well."

Her sudden nervousness had not communicated itself to him. She could see that he thought her foolish. Probably he was right. Always excepting this uncanny absence of throb which had followed the stopping of the engines, her ears conveyed no message of the unusual to her brain. She heard Jenkins say, "Good night, sir", to some passenger obviously just down from the smoking room, various footfalls, a door close, water running from a tap.

All the same, she didn't want the light put out—yet.

Meanwhile John had turned away from her; and was snuggling his head under the bedclothes. The action made her feel rather selfish. It must be more than ten minutes since the photograph had fallen down. If anything were really wrong—and what could go really wrong on a ship like this—some alarm would have been given.

Besides, the engines were going again. She could just feel the pulse of them. Surely, that was the pulse of the engines? Good. Splendid.

She stretched up a hand to the switch. As she did so, someone knocked on the door.

§ 3

More knocks. Timid, yet persistent. Charlotte called, sharply, "Who is it?" John started up. The door handle twisted; and in came Dwight Mansfield.

Aurelia's brother was still dressed. Her first sight of that young face—clean-shaven, high of cheek bone, with the thin sensitive nose—showed Charlotte that he was perturbed.

"I'm terribly sorry", he began. "But I don't know what

to do about my sister and that kid of hers. So I thought I'd come to you."

He looked at John. John said, "I don't quite follow".

Dwight looked at her. He seemed to be in two minds before he went on, "Of course it may not be anything. Nobody else seems to be worrying. But I can't get over the idea I felt us hit it".

"Hit what?" John spoke.

"It looked like an iceberg. I'd just thrown my hand in. That's how I happened to see it go past the smoking room window. We bumped, too. That I'm quite sure of. Twice. Oh, and I just heard a chap say there's a lot of ice on the fore-deck. So I thought perhaps I ought to go and wake Aurelia... Just in case."

He broke off.

"Are you sure it was an iceberg?" asked John.

"That's what it looked like anyway. And it must have been some height. At least as high as we are. Because I only saw the side of it, not the top."

He broke off again; continued, "What do you think I ought to do about Aurelia, sir?"

John hesitated. Charlotte spoke. "Go and tell her to get dressed, Dwight. Tell her that's what I'm going to do."

Instinctively she waited till the boy had left them before she got out of bed.

"The chances are we only grazed the thing", said John. "I only hope that lad doesn't start a panic." But by then he too had his feet on the floor. Charlotte saw his eyes go to the lifebelts on the top of the wardrobe. He reached up; took them; dropped them on to his bed, and switched on the centre light.

"Just in case", he smiled. "And, also just in case, you might as well put on your thickest combies."

She was at the chest of drawers by then—her impulse to wrench at it. But his words steadied her—though a scrap of knowledge acquired in her schooldays had flickered up into her mind.

The bulk of an iceberg—five-sevenths—or could it be six—was always under water. Therefore...

"You needn't be so modest", said John, "I won't look." And abruptly she realised that she must have hesitated about taking off her nightgown, and that it would be a tight fit to get her evening corset over these woollen combinations.

Loosening the laces, pressing the bottom hook into its eye, she was again conscious of the desire to wrench.

"Take it easy", said John. "Lay you five to four there's no need to dress at all."

Moderately calm again—one must, one simply must control oneself—she managed to fasten her blouse, to button her boots, to hook up the long tweed skirt and put on her coat.

John was still in his underwear when she said, "I'd better go and see how Aurelia's getting on. It won't be so easy for her with nurse and Mercy".

"Lifebelt first", said John.

He picked the heavy contraption from the bed; dropped it over her shoulders, and tied the cords. She noticed that his hands were absolutely steady.

"I'll join you in five minutes", he went on. "Ten at the outside. There's nothing to get into a state about. Tell Aurelia so with my compliments."

"I'm not in a state, if that's what you're driving at, John."

"No?" He laughed. "All right. I'll take your word for it."

She had a final glimpse of him, sitting down to thrust his thick legs into a pair of homespun trousers before she closed the door.

§ 4

As she started quickly aft along the corridor, Charlotte experienced a most curious hallucination. This rubber carpet seemed to be sloping, ever so slightly, upwards. Three of the doors she had to pass before reaching Aurelia's were open. Peering hastily in, she saw that two of the staterooms were empty. In the third, a middle-aged spinster who sat at her table was gathering rugs over a befurred arm.

Charlotte wanted to stop, to ask Miss Hillyer if she knew anything; but refrained, and hurried on. It was not until

she had her fingers round the handle of Aurelia's door that she heard the first shriek of escaping steam.

The sudden noise, breaking on a silence still rather uncanny, petrified her. It took appreciable seconds before she realised what must be causing it, and went in to hear Mercy's, "O Uncle Dwight, what was that?"

The child lay on her mother's bed. Near her, in a shaggy fur coat, stood Dwight. Through the communicating door Charlotte could see Aurelia and Mary Steevens, her English nurse. Both were dressed. Neither had a lifebelt on. They appeared to be tying up a parcel.

Dwight, answering Mercy, had to raise his voice several tones.

"They're just letting off steam, honey", he said.

"But why should they do that?"

"Because they've got too much, I expect."

He looked at Charlotte, who nodded as though to say, "Of course that's the reason". Then, suddenly, he stood tense.

"Wasn't that someone shouting?" he asked.

Charlotte moved back to the door, reopened it.

"Apparently", she heard herself say.

For now they could actually hear the shouting. Now it came nearer, became audible :

"Passengers . . . All passengers . . . On deck . . . With lifebelts on".

Charlotte saw Dwight's face twitch—but only once.

"Guess we'd better obey orders", he said ; and reached for the top of the wardrobe.

They were still helping Mary Steevens and Aurelia to put on their belts when Jenkins ran in.

"It's all right, Mary", said Jenkins, discipline momentarily forgotten. "Just a precaution, darling." Then, to Charlotte, "The boat deck would be best for all of you, m'lady. The first stairs on your right".

He ran on. Charlotte turned to Dwight saying, "Take them up. I must go back . . ."

But John, too, came running, almost before Dwight had lifted Mercy from the bed.

CHAPTER THREE

§ 1

JOHN was a little out of breath. He stood to recover himself. Charlotte saw that he had put on his heaviest overcoat and was carrying her sables.

"Are we really all going on deck?" asked Mercy.

"Yes, darling." Her mother spoke.

"But won't that be bad for my cold?"

"Of course it won't. Or we shouldn't be taking you."

John moved aside to let them out of the stateroom. Mary Steevens stood hesitant. He said, "Go on, nurse. You next"; and waved Dwight through the door. Alone with him for a second, Charlotte asked, "About how bad do you think it is?"

"Just a precaution, I should say." He held up the heavy fur. "But you'd better get into this."

She buttoned the cloak. They followed the others—Mercy still asking questions, Aurelia answering them. As they reached the foot of the stairway they again heard the order, "All passengers on deck with lifebelts on". But halfway up, the shriek of the escaping steam deafened them to all other sounds.

§ 2

As she stepped on to the boat deck, Charlotte Carteret experienced her first shiver of apprehension. Once under the stars, however, fear stood away. At the worst, they would only have to "take to the boats". And even that seemed a remote contingency, with this colossal ship so steady and the sea so calm.

"But I wish this noise would stop", she thought. "It's worse than a railway station."

She put her fingers to her ears and looked up. No doubt, now, what was causing this noise. From pipes at the side of three of their four funnels the vapour jetted in continuous streams. She could feel occasional spots of it, falling on her upturned face like rain drops; wondered, vaguely, why those drops were only just warm.

The stars were more brilliant than ever. Her eyes swept the whole canopy of them before John's hand on her arm recalled her to the nearer scene.

The nearer scene held little of the unusual. The boat deck—naturally enough—was filling. She recognised a few people she knew, all of them fully clothed except one—a fattish old man still in his dressing gown and pyjamas.

She thought, stupidly, "If he doesn't catch pneumonia it'll be a miracle". Then she looked at the nearest boat.

The cover was already off that boat. Two sailors and a steward in a white jacket were swarming over the side of it. One of these threw a rope. A sailor on deck caught and began to coil it. Two more sailors had reached for the cranks on the rocking-arms of the davits.

The long boat began to swing outwards. She caught herself thinking, "It's *miles* down. Nothing would induce me to go in one of them". Looking aft, she saw a second boat start to move on its davits. Then she realised that John had his other arm through Aurelia's, and that Aurelia and the nurse had Mercy between them, each holding one of her hands.

Noise still forbade speech. Besides there was nothing one could say. Aurelia smiled at her. She smiled an answer; looked aft again. That boat was level with the deck. She saw the figure of an officer vault the rails that divided first class from second.

The officer seemed to have given some order. Charlotte saw various figures, which had moved forward across the deck, move back again. It appeared to her that a woman was protesting. Some of the figures turned. She lost them from vision. Other figures remained. But none of them got into the boat, which now began to descend.

Afterwards she learned how that boat had been filled from the deck below. But, for the moment, she thought it must be

going down empty. The thing struck her as rather peculiar. Accurate thought, however, remained impossible on account of the noise ; which seemed to shatter her ear drums every time she took her fingers away.

Then, amazingly, the shriek of the steam stopped ; and, with full hearing, came an extraordinary clarity of vision. Just for a second the whole scene, near and far, flashed itself stereoscopically on to some newly-sensitised plate in her mind.

In the near scene, every pore of them distinct under the electrics, were John's face, Aurelia's, the child's face, the nurse's, Dwight's. A little farther away, Miss Hillyer was offering one of her many rugs to the fattish old man in the dressing gown and pyjamas. Charlotte heard him say, "Thank you so much, but I'm quite warm".

Beyond these, the boat which had been slung outwards made an apparent dip in the line. She saw stars between its keel and black, distant water. Higher, above its gunwale, she saw more stars, millions upon millions of them. Ropes creaked. The keel, the gunwale, sank to deck level. Through this gap she could see clear to the horizon.

Among the stars at horizon level it seemed to her that lights moved. She caught herself thinking, "There must be plenty of other ships quite close to us, and of course we've got wireless telegraphy".

Looking forward over the quiet heads of many people, it seemed to her that the foot of the nearest funnel, the top of the bridge and foremast, were those of a ship at anchor.

Queerly, after that one, "Thank you so much, but I'm quite warm", nobody in the near scene spoke aloud—though she imagined that some of the heads between her and the huge foot of the funnel must be whispering—till a voice called, "Women and children only. Men keep away from the boat".

It took her a moment or so to locate that voice. She was aware, simultaneously, of Miss Hillyer and three or four other women, one carrying a baby, on the move towards the gap, and of the figure of one officer silhouetted against water. John's hand seemed as though it were trying to exercise some compulsion on her arm.

She stiffened her muscles against John's fingers. She

heard herself whisper, "I won't go"; heard Mercy's question; Aurelia's answer, "No, darling. Certainly not. It would be much too cold for you in one of those little boats".

"It's no good being obstinate." John's lips were touching her ear. "I don't see how anything could happen myself. But it just might."

She whispered back, "You said she was unsinkable. Anyway I can't go if Aurelia doesn't".

John nodded.

"There's another ship quite close", he went on. "I saw its lights a little while ago."

The voice called again, "Women and children only. As quickly as you can please. There are several more places".

Two or three men who had climbed into the boat stepped out again.

No woman moved. Charlotte heard a young voice behind her say, "I never heard such nonsense. Does he really expect I'd go without you, darling?"

Then a sharp explosion wrenched her eyes to the bridge; and she saw the trail of the first rocket shudder high above masthead.

The rocket detonated. A cone of white stars spangled against the silver. The white stars spread. She watched them falling, expiring, little red lights extinguished before they reached the flat black sea.

§ 3

A second rocket and a third—with a thousand faces upturned to watch them—had detonated before Charlotte's mind was working again. And even then she experienced no fear.

The drama of this new scene held her body taut; but little of its implication penetrated to her mentality. They were signalling to that other ship—the one of which John had just spoken. The other ship would come to their rescue. All the more reason, therefore, not to risk the boats.

By the light of the fourth rocket, she saw that the covers were off several other boats; and that the one nearest to her

had already gone down. She remembered, vaguely, that it had gone down half-empty.

The officer was calling again. She became conscious of movement in the crowd by which she was now surrounded. A woman, another woman, pressed past John. She heard Dwight say, "I'd go if I were you, Aurelia".

Aurelia said, "No. No".

The immediate crowd thinned. Another boat was at deck level. Women were being helped into her. But most of the women still held back. Charlotte saw the officer step forward. He spoke to a girl, who shook her head; to an older woman, who let him take her by the arm.

She heard him give the order, "Stand by the falls".

Voices answered, "Aye, aye, sir". Someone shouted, "Lower away".

By the light of the fifth rocket she saw that boat, too, disappear half-empty and men straining at its ropes while the officer ran to bawl his last, "When afloat, row round to the gangway and wait for orders".

But that, she did not hear; and a third boat was being lowered while she still stood taut, feeling almost as though she were watching some Drury Lane melodrama rather than an actual occurrence.

Looking aft again, it seemed to her that there must be some delay. There, only the one boat had gone down. She saw knots of men swarming from between two funnels. "Panic?" she asked herself. But the men halted, made no effort to cross the deck. And suddenly her attention was riveted by a closer sight—that of a figure in a dark uniform with some brass musical instrument under his arm.

That figure ran to the door of what she knew to be the gymnasium. Others—one dragging a heavy violoncello—followed it. Out of the gymnasium ran a boy with a chair.

The 'cellist sat. The other bandsmen gathered about him. They struck up one of the latest songs from America. Queerly, Charlotte thought, "How I hate this new ragtime"; and as the tune changed, "Now what's that out of? *The Quaker Girl* or *A Waltz Dream*. We took Johnny and Philip to both".

Thinking thus she became aware of several new circum-

stances. John's hand was no longer on her arm. Neither was Aurelia's. And the planks under her feet seemed to be tilting.

It struck her that this tilt was twofold. More of her weight seemed to be on her right foot than on her left; and when she turned away from watching the bandsmen, more of it on her toes than on her heels.

She was conscious of one fear then. Eventually John might insist on her getting into one of those boats. And supposing the ropes broke. Supposing she were pitched into that black water from that enormous height.

§ 4

Dwight was whispering, "You've just got to see sense, Aurelia".

Aurelia was whispering back, "I tell you, I won't go. Even if they only keep us in the boats a few hours and then pull us up again it may be the death of my Mercy".

And if Aurelia wouldn't go, how could she, Charlotte?

Besides, the other ship must have seen all these rockets. And the band was still playing—that waltz from the *Count of Luxembourg*. Queerly again, Charlotte thought, "They'd hardly be playing that if there were any real danger".

Yet the few men round the remaining boats seemed to be working feverishly. And their officer had thrown his coat off. Between her and him, stood a long line of women who held out their arms as he helped them, one by one, across what must be a gap between ship's deck and boat's gunwale.

Yes. It was a gap. Two boys had just thrown a deck chair across it. John was whispering now, "Neither of us can do anything with Aurelia. See if you can make her go".

She whispered back, "But I don't want to go either. It must be absolutely safe here. Look at all those people walking up and down just as if nothing had happened".

John took her arm again; forced her away from Dwight and Aurelia, Mary Steevens and Mercy.

"I don't imagine we're sinking", he said. "In fact, I'm sure we're not. Still, as a favour to me, I want you to go, and to take them with you."

"As a favour to me", John repeated.

Another rocket burst, showing her his face, grave yet smiling. As their eyes met it came to her that this was the first time in all their years together that she had heard him use that phrase—and that there could be no denying him.

"All right", she heard herself say, "as you're so insistent."

He let go of her arm. She walked back to Aurelia. He followed; stood by, making no comment, while she was saying: "I've made up my mind to go. I want you and nurse and Mercy to come with me. Believe me, it can't do her any harm. She's so well wrapped up; and the chances are we'll be back on board long before morning".

Aurelia heard her out in silence.

At last she asked: "You honestly think she'll be all right?"

Charlotte said, "My dear, I'm sure of it. And I ought to know. I've had four of them".

Dwight said, "What about this, just as an extra wrap?"

He peeled off his shaggy coat while he was speaking. Mercy shrilled, "Oh, do let's go, mummy. It'll be heaps of fun. Specially if Jenkins comes with us".

By the light of yet another rocket, Charlotte saw the nurse's face go white to the very lips. Aurelia, still hesitant, made half a step forward. The child caught her by the hand, saying, "Please, mummy. I shall enjoy it so. Better even than the fireworks".

As they moved to join the line of women at the edge of the deck, Dwight, carrying his coat, followed them.

Vaguely, Charlotte realised that John, also, was close behind.

CHAPTER FOUR

§ 1

STEPPING to the edge of the deck, joining the line of women who waited there, Charlotte Carteret's one fear increased. Heights had always put this particular terror into her. That diving board last summer, for instance . . .

"I mustn't look down", she told herself. "Whatever else I do, I must not look down."

Meanwhile, however, all other terrors stood away. She still had that sense of being in a theatre; of watching a spectacle rather than being a participant in actual events.

Her eyes gave her the clearest pictures. They showed her every rope hanging loose from a davit head, every face of every man who still worked on and below the few remaining boats. She saw the officer, still in his shirt sleeves, come doubling back from some mysterious errand. She even noticed—wondering what could be causing it—the bulge the revolver made in one pocket of his trousers.

Then her eyes seemed to fail; and she realised that she had been seeing those pictures by the light of the rockets.

Surely it was time they fired another rocket?

But no more of the sharp explosions echoed from the bridge; and, looking vainly for those trails of fire which had shuddered up over the masthead, it seemed to her as though the shadowy mast itself were tilting—away from her towards the sea.

Gradually, her sight cleared again. But now only the nearest faces were distinguishable by the light of the electrics. She looked at Aurelia, at the nurse. Neither spoke. Even Mercy, tiny between them, had fallen silent.

A voice called, "Any more ladies? Any more ladies?" Then, "Any seaman there for the after fall?"

Another voice sang out, "All ready on the after fall, sir".

"Lower away."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Ropes creaked. Peering over Mercy's head, Charlotte realised that yet another boat had gone down; and that this one in front of them was almost the last on their part of the deck.

Instinct turned her to John.

"You too", she heard herself say. "And Dwight. There'll be room."

She could just see John's reassuring smile; the slight dissenting nod.

"I'll be all right", he said. "See you for breakfast."

Dwight said, "Sure. Grab on to this, nurse". He handed the shaggy coat to Mary Steevens.

Both men stepped back. Another man tried to step past John. She saw John grab that man by the arm as she turned away to hear a quiet, "One at a time, please, ladies", from the officer.

The woman at the other end of the line held out shadowy hands. A white arm went round her, lifted her.

"If I look down . . ." thought Charlotte.

But she could not resist the impulse to look down, into that yawning gap between the edge of the deck and the gunwale of this long swaying boat.

The gap seemed to widen. Slowly. Ever so slowly. Far and far below she could see another boat jerking down past lighted portholes. But farther still was a nothingness—not even the side of the ship visible.

A nothingness. A blackness. A void chasm.

Wrenching her eyes up from that void, wrenching her foot back from that chasm, she was aware of Mary Steevens lifting Mercy, of hands stretching up from the boat.

Nurse followed child. Mother followed nurse. Charlotte knew that she had her own arms out; that a strong hand, a strong arm had caught her; that she, too, had been lifted across that slowly widening gap . . .

§ 2

One moment's complete black-out, and Charlotte came to her senses. She was on her feet, wedged between Mary Steevens and Aurelia. Something hurt her knees. She realised that something for wood. The edge of a seat no doubt.

Then she recognised the shaggy bundle standing on that seat for Mercy, held fast in Aurelia's arms.

A little way from her stood a man in a white jacket. She heard herself ask, "Is that you, Jenkins?"

The man did not answer. He was watching that other man, still on deck.

It came to her that they were still level with the deck; that a lot of faces were peering at them. The man there, whom she now recognised for the officer, called, "Stand by". Beyond him, she could just make out the shapes of two more women.

The officer lifted one of those women. Charlotte grabbed for her free hand, pulled her inboard.

"Thanks awfully", she said.

The other woman jumped. Jenkins—it was Jenkins—caught her, steadied her.

Looking to the deck again, Charlotte saw Dwight, John. There was still room, it seemed to her, for Dwight and John, when she heard the shout, "Both falls. Lower away"; when she heard the first clank of the gear; the first shriek of rope on pulley block; when she felt the first drop of the boat.

The seat struck hard against her knees. Blinking with the sudden pain, she never saw John stoop and catch Dwight round the thighs. All she saw was that John had lifted Dwight; that the boy was struggling.

Another shriek of the ropes. Another jerk of the boat. Then John was at the very edge of the deck, breaking Dwight's grip from his neck; heaving him.

She heard Dwight's head strike the far side of the boat; heard his jacket tear as Jenkins grabbed him. But her eyes were for John. Why didn't John jump? Why was he just standing there? Why was he smiling?

John's face had been sliced away. Nearly all the faces on

deck had been sliced away. This boat was dropping. Dropping.

Why had John thrown Dwight into this boat? Why had he smiled? She knew that smile. John always looked like that when he felt he'd been rather clever.

So . . .

So . . .

But that wasn't the truth. That couldn't be the truth. Ships as big as this didn't sink.

Besides there must be more lifeboats. On the other side. If the worst came to the worst, John would get into one of those other boats.

"Lower stern. Lower stern."

What was Jenkins making such a noise about? Was he in a panic?

"Lower bow. Lower bow."

What was the man at the other end of this boat making such a noise about? He must be in a panic, too.

So she mustn't be. Even though heights always made her feel sick . . .

§ 3

. . . All those last thoughts, Charlotte understood, must have passed through her mind in a few seconds. Because the face of the man at whom Jenkins shouted was still distinguishable.

"Lower together", shouted Jenkins; and the boat dropped again on those taut and shrieking ropes.

They were hanging—how many of them?—in mid air. The side of the ship had receded. Therefore it must be—what was the word?—listing.

Another down-jerk of the ropes. They were level with a porthole. By the light streaming out to them she saw another boat being lowered, Jenkins' face, Dwight's.

Dwight lay across the steward's feet. Motionless. She saw the woman who had jumped in last lean towards him. The light of the porthole was cut off. She felt the whole boat sway, tilt, hang level again.

The light of another porthole flashed on them. That one

was wide open, uncurtained. She looked through it, into an empty stateroom. The carpet in that stateroom seemed to be moving. She recognised the carpet for a film of water. They were jerked down again.

Down. And away from the side of the ship. What was that breaking aboard the ship. Glass? China?

She knew now—though she tried her hardest to fight the knowledge—that the ship might sink. The terror of height vanished. She was no longer afraid of this dropping. If only these ropes would drop them more swiftly. If only they could reach the sea.

That other boat had reached the sea.

She craned her head to look over the gunwale. The black surface of the sea was close. Closer. The boat had stopped swaying. She felt it touch water, saw the rope behind Jenkins slacken.

Jenkins looked up. He seemed to be hesitating. A man's voice behind her called, "Orders are to wait".

She heard Jenkins mutter, "Boat full. No good waiting". He turned. She saw his hand go to his hip pocket. Something gleamed in the half-light. Something snapped; splashed to water. She felt the boat swing out; stand out, endways, from the ship.

Then the boat seemed to shoot from under her; and, staggering to recover her balance, she understood that worn ropes must have been cut or cast off.

They swung round again. She found herself staring up at the ship.

Stars outlined the top deck, the masts, the funnels of the ship. All its portholes were still gleaming. They towered above one. Were they leaning over one? Would they fall on one?

Behind her, she was aware of movement. A woman's voice gasped at her ear, "Sorry. They're trying to get the oars out". She heard oar looms clash on wood, oar blades strike water. Another boat came down the side of the ship. Their boat began to move. The ship receded, sliding. The illusion that it might fall on them went. The illusion that nothing could sink it returned.

"John's safe enough", she thought. "So are we."

Then, for the first time, she felt the cold.

The cold was like a huge hand, very quiet but clamping her in ice. First, it clamped the ice on her lips; then on her forehead. Next, her cheeks seemed to freeze. Presently she felt that huge hand gripping for her feet.

Her own hands, curiously enough, seemed to be resisting the cold. She remembered, suddenly, that John had given her a pair of heavy gloves after he had helped her into her sables; that she had put them on.

"I must have been terribly frightened", she thought next. But after that, for long minutes, every fear ceased.

§ 4

During those minutes, with their boat drawing away, length by length, from the ship, speech came back to Charlotte Carteret and Aurelia Vansuythen. Aurelia felt the cold, too. She was worrying about Mercy again. Charlotte remembers herself saying, "She can't come to any harm in that coat", and Aurelia's, "No, darling. Don't try to put your head out. There's nothing to see".

But always—to see—there was the ship. One small boat was still coming down its side. The boat touched water. And slowly, very slowly, Charlotte became aware of something peculiar about the ship. Steady, she seemed. Absolutely steady. But—but what had happened to all those rows, one above the other, of lights?

They were at an angle—those porthole lights. Tilted forward. At the bow, the lowest of them were almost level with blackness of the water. At the stern, they were high above the water.

And now, suddenly, one, two, three of those low white lights at the bow had gone out, leaving only the one red light by the bridge.

"Did you see that?" whispered Aurelia.

"Yes."

All this time, Charlotte had been vaguely aware of Dwight, motionless at Jenkins' feet; and of the woman who bent over

him. But as her frozen lips framed that, "Yes", she forgot all about Dwight. Neither did she hear Aurelia's next words.

The ship hypnotized her. She was scarcely conscious of the black water widening between her and those tilting portholes, of the star-blaze beyond those four dark funnels.

The funnels. Tilting, too!

Those funnels, and the two thin shadows of the masts, *had* tilted. They no longer stood upright. They also were at an angle to the sea. A narrowing angle! And somewhere under those masts and funnels . . . But no. John would have got away in another boat. The whole of this dark sea was covered with boats. She could hear them hailing one another. On such a ship, there would be boats for everybody.

Such an enormous ship. Could she really *sink*, disappear altogether? Impossible. And yet—more of those lights were going out at her bow. The one red light was almost at water level. While at her stern . . .

Horribly, Charlotte became aware that the lights at the stern were being lifted; lifted higher and higher. Behind her she heard a voice call, "Put your backs into it", and two other voices: "She won't go": "If she does, she'll take us with her": "I tell you, she won't".

For the red light still gleamed above water. And, during an eternity, as it seemed, while the black bulk of the ship stood motionless, tilted against the stars, Charlotte found herself praying, voicelessly, "O God, don't let her sink. Please don't let her sink".

Then the voice behind her called, "Heave, there. Heave"; Jenkins stood up shouting, "Take the time from me. One. Two. Three. Four".

And suddenly, awfully, irremediably, Charlotte knew that no God would answer her prayer; that the stern was lifting again; higher, always higher; that the red light had gone out forward; that three whole lines of light had gone out forward; that the bow was under, under . . .

Yet she still had time to pray, always voicelessly, "O God—no—no—no—You mustn't", before the bow dipped clean under, before she saw water surge over the bridge, and

mannikin figures leaping, and that one funnel breaking from its stays.

The funnel toppled. The whole ship seemed to twist. Then the stern reared, up and up, out of the water; and simultaneously, as though extinguished by a single switch, every light was blotted from the portholes.

The single switch flashed those lights again. Just once. Just for the fraction of a second.

A dark ship.

And noise roaring out from that dark ship, shattering the quiet along the sea.

§ 5

The noise was so awful, so unexpected, that one's whole mind rocked to it; rocked on, while crash followed sliding crash; and between the crashes, groans as of a huge beast in its last torment.

Till suddenly there was no more noise—only the ghastly shape.

That shape—Charlotte's stunned mind could just realise—was the half of the ship. It stood upright—a darkness beyond the immediate darkness—an enormous pillar of shadow, outlined against stars.

Looking on that pillar, it seemed as though her heart had stopped its beating, as though she and all those about her were dead.

And the ship, also, must be dead. This high and ghastly shape was only its monument.

For the monument would not fall. It stood there. It stood there. Upright. A vast black column above the black plinth of the sea.

Then, horribly, she was aware of her heart beating again, stifling her, and of the knowledge that the monument must topple.

It had begun to topple. It was no longer quite upright. It slanted. It was being drawn down.

Down.

More stars—a rush of stars—above the top of that shadowy slanting column.

She heard Aurelia gasp, "Christ. Sweet Christ".

The last of the ship dived under. She could see only stars now. Billions upon billions of stars—ice-bright to the very ink-black knife-edge of the water floor.

At that moment, she heard the screams.

She could distinguish no word among all those screams. They hardly sounded human. Yet she could just see that they were made by humans—just see those tiny shapes, those miniature heads—there, where the base of the huge shadow had been.

The screams were shrieks now—piercing shrieks all along the ink-black water floor. She heard a voice—could it be her own?—shouting above them, "We must row back. We must save as many as we can".

Jenkins, grasping his tiller, took no notice. And the men behind her still rowed. She heard the two voices: "Hold her steady": "We'll get the wash any minute now".

But no single wave troubled that oily water, and after a few more strokes the men ceased rowing. She heard herself call to Jenkins, "We can't leave them", and Aurelia's, "Go back. Oh, please, go back".

For the shrieks had not stopped—though now the agonised voices of them seemed a little fainter, a little huskier.

Jenkins said, with a queer note of command underneath the respect, "M'lady, I can't do that. It's too dangerous. We've hardly room for another. But I'll stand by".

§ 6

They stood by, for what must have been a long half-hour, with the shrieks growing fainter and fainter; till no more tiny shapes, and only a few dots which might have been heads showed above what might have been black treacle, so dark, so still was the water which met those ice-bright stars.

CHAPTER FIVE

§ 1

CHARLOTTE CARTERET had not seen that last head, still above water, and swimming towards them. It was a shout from Jenkins which roused her—as from a coma—to the actuality of the white face, and the boat turning broadside on to it, and the hand upstretched to the oarblade.

But the face was not John's.

She found herself resenting that, bitterly, as she turned to watch the dripping man helped on board.

Her whole mind, for that one second, was a resentment. She remembered the shrieks, the boats which had gone down half-empty, the men she had seen ordered back on deck from those half-empty boats.

And yet, there was still a possibility that John lived.

At that thought, hope rose in her, blotting out resentment. And with the hope she was conscious of an enormous selfishness, a huge joy that she, at any rate, should be alive.

The joy shamed her. But she could not rid herself of it. She was quite safe in this boat. They would be picked up. She would see her Johnny again, her Philip, her Elizabeth, her Maurice.

"Beastly of me", she thought. "With all those people drowned. John, too, perhaps."

But John—hope repeated—might, must be, alive.

Aurelia's voice wrenched thought clean out of her. "The man's almost naked", Aurelia was saying. "He'll freeze to death if we can't find something to put over him."

Charlotte felt a little less of a beast as she wriggled herself out of her sables, and Mary Steevens passed them along.

This gave her a little more room. She could move her

shoulders. She could lean forward, touch the woman who was again bending over Dwight.

Doing this, she wondered when she and Aurelia and the nurse could have managed to seat themselves; and recognised the shapeless bundle stretched on Aurelia's and the nurse's knees for Mercy, asleep.

"I think he's coming round", said the woman, in answer to her question about Dwight. "I've been bathing his forehead. The water's so cold it almost burns one. There are little lumps of ice in it."

Dwight stirred, moaned, tried to sit up. The woman said to him, "Don't try to move yet"; and to Charlotte, "I've given him my rug, but it isn't very thick. Do you think there's another one to spare?"

Charlotte turned her head, and called, "There's a man hurt. Can anyone spare a rug or a coat?"

After a pause someone called back out of the semi-darkness, "There's a dressing gown he can have".

The dressing gown was passed along. There seemed to be the best part of a hundred people in the boat. But the only other men Charlotte could see were the two at the oars, which had begun to sweep again. She called to them, "Isn't there anyone else to row?" One of them answered, "No, mum. Only us two". The other said, "Unless any of you ladies can help".

Charlotte turned to Jenkins, asking, "Are you in charge of us?"

Jenkins said, "I don't rightly know, m'lady. But I suppose so".

"Then hadn't you better ask these ladies if any of them can row? I can, if you want me to."

Jenkins stood up on the tiller platform. He called the question. Several voices answered. Forward, Charlotte heard the noise of two more oars being got out.

"Pardon me, miss", said Jenkins to the woman who had wrapped the dressing gown round Dwight, "but I'll have to move Mr. Mansfield."

He stooped to open one of the lockers. Charlotte saw a match spurt, a hurricane lamp lit.

The light seemed to intensify both the cold and the darkness ; but somehow it made them into a community.

Jenkins stood again. He waved the lamp. Far away across scarcely heaving water, another lamp signalled. A faint hail reached them. Jenkins hailed back. Farther still Charlotte could make out another light, a green one. Beyond this appeared a curious triangular shadow, darker than the stars yet somehow part of them. She indicated the shadow to Jenkins and asked if it could be a ship.

Jenkins said, "No, m'lady. That'd be the iceberg we hit".

Presently she found herself with an oar in her hand. The other woman on that oar asked, "Does one feather with these things?" From the bow, a girlish voice called in a high treble, "Let's all sing something"; and piped up, "Jolly boating weather and a hay harvest breeze".

But nobody had the heart to join in.

§ 2

The women on the oars rowed very slowly. But it took all their breath. Most of the others talked. Fragments of their speech reached the rowers.

"How soon do you think we'll be picked up?" Charlotte heard; and, "One of the sailors says the *Olympic's* quite close. They were marconi-ing her up to the last minute".

Someone else said, "I'm glad we've got that light. She might run us down otherwise". Mercy had woken up. Her voice, too, Charlotte could distinguish. She thought, selfishly, "I'm glad it's Mercy and not Maurice. Maurice is so impressionable". The stars, every time she swung back on her oar, seemed brighter than ever. She thought of John again. How much did she love John? How much would it matter to her if . . . if he were not in one of the other boats.

After what seemed a long time, Jenkins called that they were to take a spell, and the word came down, "There's water if anyone's thirsty". The woman resting with her on the heavy oar said, "What I'd like, is a cigarette".

A girl whose back they had been touching at every stroke said, "I've got some but I'm afraid I haven't any matches"

An old lady who sat next to her produced a box of wind vestas and struck one.

The illumination showed Charlotte the face of the man they had hauled out of the water. He lay, still under her sables, in the bottom of the boat. His lower jaw had dropped. His wide-open eyes were glassy.

But it was not until they were rowing on again that she realised he was dead.

The fact that this one man should be dead struck her as rather tragic ; but did not seem of much importance. Hundreds and hundreds of men had gone to their deaths. And somebody was to blame for it.

Again, she remembered the shrieks. Again, resentment seethed in her. There had not been enough boats.

Why ?

§ 3

Gradually, Charlotte's resentment died down ; and the splendour, rather than the tragedy of these last hours, penetrated to her mind. Everybody had behaved so well. No panic. Not a trace of it.

And so many—unlike herself—must have known what was bound to happen. The officers had. The men had. John had. Otherwise he would never have thrown Dwight into this boat.

Thought left the past ; came back to the present. It must be far more than an hour since the ship had gone down. The cold seemed—if that were possible—to be increasing. This oar handle had torn one of her gloves. The air on her finger was like the edge of a frozen knife. Only by kicking her feet against this wood could she maintain any feeling in them.

It must be worse, though, for those who were not rowing ; and for Jenkins, whose white coat she could just see by the light of the lamp on the tiller platform.

A good man, this Jenkins. One might try to do something for him and Mary Steevens. Queer, they should be in love—and that one might never have known about it. Lucky Mary, with her man in the boat—and nothing more to worry about.

Still, John might just be safe.

She grew aware of movement near the hurricane lamp, of an altercation there. Presently a shadow rose between her and the lamp. She saw a figure squeeze past the figures she knew for Aurelia and Mary.

The figure crawled over another seat. It stepped over the dead man.

"Let me relieve one of you", said Dwight.

"I'd be glad to. I'm aching all over", said the other woman on the oar.

§ 4

Dwight said, in answer to Charlotte's question, "Thanks, Lady Carteret. I'm feeling bully"; but, even by that faint light, she could see that his face was completely bloodless.

"Just knocked out for a while", he went on.

She spoke as she might have spoken to her own Johnny, "Don't talk".

"But I must know what's happened. That girl said the ship went down. You see, I can't remember anything after your husband——"

"Don't try to. Just row."

The oar, now that Dwight was on it, seemed a little lighter. Charlotte realised that she must have been doing most of the work. Gradually, however, the oar grew heavy again. And, during their next spell, the boy made no effort to speak.

It was during this spell that Charlotte heard the girl in the bow call, "Look. Over there. I'm sure I can see the lights of another ship". But soon one of the sailors said, "Them Northern Lights. That's all she's seeing". And to Charlotte this new radiance only showed the blink of what Jenkins said was the iceberg.

She thought, when the order came for them to row again, "The iceberg looks closer. I expect that's why he's keeping us at it".

Presently she also had the illusion of another ship, two lights one above the other. But, almost at once, the lower of those two lights moved sideways, and she realised that they were the hurricane lanterns on two other boats.

The one green light by which Jenkins was steering them, she could not see; and by then fatigue had begun to dim all her faculties. The night began to seem interminable. The very flicker of the Northern Lights accentuated the impossibility of dawn coming—ever again—across this ink-black tranquillity of sea.

Dimly, she caught herself hating this sea, fearing it. If a wind were to spring up now. If they couldn't keep away from that blinking phosphorescence which was the iceberg.

But why the phosphorescence? Could that be the first glimmer of dawn? There—at horizon level. Were these ice-bright stars actually paling?

It was only the false dawn. Yet it put the heart back into her. And in a few more minutes, resting on their oars again, they heard a faint, far thud, as of a distant hammer, knocking on the level floor of the sea.

§ 5

"Did you hear it?" asked Dwight.

"Yes."

"What do you think it could have been?"

"I haven't the slightest idea", said Charlotte. "And I'm sure we ought to be rowing."

But no order came to row; and she heard one of the sailors say, "It might have been". Meanwhile Jenkins was on his feet again, and she saw that he had one hand cupped to his ear. Then someone said, "He thinks it might have been a rocket".

And about five minutes later—still resting on her oar—Charlotte heard Jenkins shout, "It's a ship".

The shout wrenched her head, and every head with hers, to their starboard bow. One above the other, at farthest horizon, where the ink-black knife-edge of water cut the ultimate ice-bright star, rose two yellowish lights. And those two lights remained one above the other. And they moved. And as they moved the one moved upwards, perpendicularly above the other.

Charlotte heard Dwight gasp, "Gee, he's right"; was

aware, from the play of light and shadow up and down the boat, that Jenkins must have lifted, must be waving the hurricane lamp. Then, slowly, very slowly, it came home to her that the lower of those two yellowish lights at horizon rim was supported by two tiny companions—a point of red, a point of green.

Subconsciously, she waited for the oncoming ship to fire another rocket. Consciously, she knew that other lamps waved from other boats ; that this sound she could hear was of faraway men cheering.

No rocket rose. Silence followed that thin cheering. But the lamps still waved. And now Charlotte saw what might have been a paper torch glimmer where no boat had been before. And always those four lights at horizon rim, those two points of yellow supported on those two points of red and green, were more apparently a ship.

Still no rockets. But presently, as the ship changed course, the red and the green lights approached each other. And suddenly Charlotte saw portholes gleaming ; suddenly she could trace—ever so faintly against paling stars—the outline of a mast, funnels.

Sheer joy blinded her for a long second. When she could see again, she realised that the ship was still moving. It moved farther to starboard. It seemed to be steaming away from them. She experienced another second of complete panic before one of the sailors shouted, "All right. She's seen us. She's heaving to".

CHAPTER SIX

§ 1

It must have been ten minutes since they had made sure of the ship.

The girl at the bow had begun to sing again—that ridiculous song in the new time that Johnny and Philip were so crazy about. “Everybody’s doing it”, she sang. “Everybody’s doing it.”

Other voices chimed in quaveringly with the chorus, “Everybody’s doing it now”.

“Hysteria”, thought Charlotte, heaving at the oarblade. Yet for the moment she, too, wanted to sing; and Dwight actually hummed to himself as they rowed.

That crazy tune petered out. Someone started another—and yet another. In the intervals, between the squeaks of leather against thole and the irregular splashing of the blades, other songs, an occasional cheer carried to them across the water.

But as yet they could not see any other boats, and soon there was no more singing in their own.

The first joy of approaching deliverance was out of them. Gratitude’s self had gone dumb; and stayed dumb even when dawn stole stealthily from under the stars.

Was this really dawn, this grayness at horizon rim? Had the stars really paled? Were they really being extinguished, one by one?

§ 2

The light came so slowly and so quietly that Charlotte could hardly realise it for day’s. Yet where a grayness had been was now a hint of gold, and now a hint of the true dawn-colour, pearl-gray tinged to pink.

She could no longer see the ship towards which Jenkins must be steering them. But every now and again she could discern the outline of another boat. And suddenly, as she and Dwight swung up and back, she saw what might have been a colossal shark's fin, dark and high above the pearl and the pink of the true dawn-colour.

Or was that enormous fin the sail of some phantom ship?

Utterly puzzled, she continued to row for some minutes. Then the sail of the phantom ship began to change its shape, to acquire colour. And abruptly she knew it for the iceberg, peaked against the skies.

One by one the stars were dwindling from those skies. Roseate swords struck through the pink and gray slathers. The iceberg itself took colour—the colour of pale blood.

She remembered the dead man then; looked for him as she swung forward again. But all she could see was a hump under her sails.

And after that, with a terrifying quickness, it was full day.

The day was raw gold. Only one silver star and the ghost of a crescent moon glimmered—there at the base of the gigantic iceberg, almost white now, blinding white now as the first finger of the sun touched it.

And here to right of her, there to left of her, towered other bergs, their snow peaks still tipped with crimson, like the Swiss mountains she had seen on her honeymoon.

Her honeymoon.

John.

Thought of her husband wiped every other thought from Charlotte's mind. Once more she rowed in a coma—seeing neither the beauty nor the terror of this sea, steel-blue at the feet of the bergs, with here a boat and there a boat disappearing between them, towards the waiting ship.

Would John be waiting for her when they reached the ship? Or was John's body . . .

She realised, horribly, that the thing her oarblade had just touched might have been a body; that they must be rowing directly over the place where she had seen the half of their own ship stand up like a pillar; stand up, and slant, and dive under.

For now all the sea was a litter. And she dared not look overside at this litter. She could only row—row.

§ 3

Beyond that upturned bulk which must have been a boat, Jenkins gave half his rowers a spell. It was impossible not to look overside now; and, looking, Charlotte experienced so ghastly a horror that, had it not been for the presence of this living community, she could have screamed.

But it seemed such a large community, and now she could see so many of their shapes, their faces, clearly. Jenkins was smiling at his Mary, and Dwight was trying to smile at her.

"Once we get round this lump of ice", said Dwight, "it oughtn't to take so very much longer."

And, during her next spell, she saw the ship.

The ship, like their own, had red funnels with black tops. The sailors recognised her at once. Her name was passed down. The old lady who had produced the vestas said, "I believe there's a wind getting up". The other woman said, "You must be tired. Would you like me to row now?"

Charlotte shook her head. She bent to the oar again. "I can help", said the woman. She rose, faced them, laid fingers to the handle, pushing as they pulled.

There was a breeze now. One could hear the faint cllop of the waves every time one thrust the boat forward. Jenkins was calling the time again, "One. Two. Three. Four".

How weary one felt.

"One. Two. Three. Four." And the breeze still rose. One could feel spray on one's face.

How weary one felt. Worn out.

"One. Two. Three. Four."

Never had one been so weary. Never. Not even at the end of that ten-mile point last season.

Last season.

John hadn't hunted last season.

Would John be waiting for her when, if, they reached the ship?

§ 4

It took them a whole hour longer to reach the ship. By then Charlotte Carteret was near to fainting; and fatigue made a film across her eyes.

She hardly heard the order to stop rowing; hardly saw that great side loom above them, and the faces peering down.

Yet she knew that this was the one moment when she dare not faint; and, as Jenkins caught the first rope, her eyes cleared.

A ladder dangled between the two ropes that were holding them. The two sailors had caught, were steadying it. One of them shouted, "We've got a kid with us".

Another rope came down; from this, swung a huge bag. She saw Aurelia and Mary Steevens strip Dwight's shaggy coat off a silent Mercy and lift her into the bag. Jenkins tied the mouth of the bag. Hand over hand, the swaying bundle was hauled up; hauled inboard.

Then a noose was flung. Jenkins fastened it round Aurelia; and she went clumsily up the ladder.

The noose came down again. Mary Steevens followed Aurelia. Others followed Mary Steevens.

Now it was her own turn to mount the ladder. And she must steady herself.

Steady herself! No panic, no breaking-down before all these people. Even if—even if John were not among them.

The cord tightened round her shoulders. The boat rocked. The ladder bellied, seemed to stiffen.

"Now", said the sailor.

Her fingers; her feet were too numb with cold to feel their own movements. She only knew that she had left the boat, that she was climbing.

Then hands caught her, and she was standing on a deck.

All about her were faces. But not *the* face. Not John's.

Dimly she heard herself ask, "Are we the last boat?" Dimly she heard one of the faces answer, "No. There are two more".

Clinging to the rail—though gentle hands tried to force

her away from the rail—she watched those two last boats make the ship.

Dozens upon dozens of faces looked up from those boats.

But never *the* face.

Never her husband's.

Never John's.

CHAPTER SEVEN

§ 1

LAURA MARSTON tapped on Lady Carteret's door, and asked how soon she should order breakfast. Having received her answer, she went downstairs.

Ellen, their London parlourmaid, still dusted in the hall. She gave Laura a quiet, "Good morning, Miss Marston". Laura gave her order, and went to the little morning room which overlooked Montpelier Square.

There were three piles of letters on the desk. Condolences. Other letters. Bills. "But she won't have time to deal with them today", thought Laura. "Or tomorrow for that matter. She must see the children first."

The telephone rang. Answering it, she recognised George Carteret's voice.

"Oh, is that you, Miss Marston?" The voice was rather like Sir John's, only dryer, with the stereotyped legal inflexion. "Excellent. I want you to give my sister-in-law a message. My brother Herbert forgot, last night, to offer her the use of his motor car. Will you please tell her that it is at her disposal should she need it."

He gave her his brother's number, which she already knew; and rang off. Laura looked at the clock, and made her way—a gaunt figure—to the dining room. Over the mantelpiece hung John's picture. She stared at it while Ellen put the final touches to the breakfast table.

How handsome he looked. Rough tweeds had always suited him. How impossible it still was to think of him as dead.

Laura's mind went back thirty years. The thrill when he had attempted to kiss her. But of course she hadn't let him.

Her mind skipped on seventeen years. She heard Mrs. Henderson say, severely, "Miss Marston, I believe I have a

position for you. My daughter's two sons will soon be needing a governess".

So nervous she had felt when she applied for the position. So shy, meeting Sir John again. But he had not even remembered her. Why should he? Just a girl he'd tried to kiss at a dance.

The present came back with a rush. She felt for her handkerchief; dabbed away that one tear before she heard the rustle of Charlotte's skirt on the staircase.

"Good morning, Laura. I'm afraid I'm very late."

"Good morning, Lady Carteret. I hope you slept well."

Ellen brought in breakfast. They sat down.

§ 2

It seemed a little strange—thought Charlotte—that one should be breakfasting with Laura. At the Manor, Laura always took her meals in her own room. It would be better to alter that now. A great many things would have to be altered. Last night George and Herbert had even suggested that it might be better to sell this house.

Not that there wouldn't be enough money. John had left quite a fortune.

Her eyes, too, went to the picture over the mantelpiece. She asked herself, for the hundredth time in these last three weeks, "How much did I care?" But the answer to that question was still obscure.

Laura gave her George's message. After a little thought she said, "A motor car makes one rather conspicuous. Besides, I expect John and Philip will want me to spend most of the day with them".

"Naturally", said Laura; and Charlotte sensed, as during their short talk of the previous evening, the other's disapproval of her decision, communicated by cable, that all the four children should be sent back to school in the normal way.

"Tomorrow", she continued, "I shall devote to Maurice and Elizabeth. I may stay the night down there. Afterwards, there will be a certain amount of business. The Manor will have to wait."

She went on with her breakfast, thinking, "There's really no reason why I should keep Laura for more than another year. Elizabeth will be almost ready to come out by then. Maurice is getting too old for a governess".

Yet it only seemed the other day that she had been telling John, "Mother thinks she's found just the type of woman we're looking for". How quickly the years went by.

"A nice bromidic thought", decided Charlotte. "Very suitable for a widow." There, however, she was again conscious of John's eyes, staring down at her from the painted canvas; and felt slightly ashamed.

A sense of humour was all very well. One's first morning in one of John's houses, though—funny, that one still thought of them as John's houses—hardly seemed the right time to indulge it. Laura, of course, had no sense of humour at all.

She began to re-question Laura. How had the children really taken the news? Last night, Laura had used the word "stoically". Somehow she couldn't quite see Maurice as a stoic. Hadn't Maurice even cried?

"Not once he understood *you* were safe", said Laura Marston. "But I had to take him into my own room the first night. He's got so much more imagination than the others, you see. And I tried to keep the papers away from him. But he was too sharp for me. Johnny smacked his head for cutting out some of the drawings."

"That was a pity."

"So I told Johnny."

Further talk elicited more details. Maurice had tried to "hack Johnny's shins". Johnny had threatened to give him a "proper whopping". Philip and Elizabeth had intervened.

"They're always at each other", commented Laura. "Though I must say it's usually Maurice's fault. He can be very provoking."

"Quite", said Charlotte; and went upstairs to put on her hat.

§ 3

The knowledge that even John's death had not kept her eldest and youngest son from quarrelling depressed Charlotte.

The feud—begun almost as soon as Maurice could walk—seemed so reasonless.

And yet, was it? Were ever two children less alike?

Her mind conceived a picture of them as she thrust the pins through the big hat with the black feathers. Her depression increased. Almost, she experienced a touch of a very old fear.

But the fear was so old that it could not register; and forthrightly, as she went downstairs again, she drove depression away. The ordeal of telling Johnny and Philip the full circumstances of their father's death would need all her faculties. She must not think of herself at all.

Ellen, taking the whistle from the heavy oak hat-stand, opened the front door; and blew for a taxi. She repeated the call. But there appeared to be none on the rank.

A hansom was trotted up.

"Why don't you take him?" asked Laura, who had joined them on the doorstep.

The horse seemed a good one.

"I think I will", said Charlotte.

The cabby opened his doors from the box. Climbing up, settling herself, she thought, "John always took them when he wasn't in a hurry"; and, halfway up Park Lane, "I wonder whether the boys will expect me to wear crape".

That last thought annoyed her. Why were boys so conventional? Why was everybody so conventional? It didn't make one any sorrier to wear full mourning.

At Baker Street, she lifted the trap and gave the cabman three shillings. He saluted her with his whip before he drove away. The man at the booking office told her that if she cared to wait for another fifteen minutes there would be a fast train.

Dawdling by a bookstall, buying the new *Strand* for Johnny and the *Wide World* for Philip, who despised fiction, she felt—for the first time—the full weight of her responsibilities. Stepping into an empty first-class compartment, all the loneliness she had experienced on her way back from America returned.

It did not seem to matter how much she had cared for

her husband. What really mattered, was the loss of his authority. George and Herbert might be her trustees, her advisers. But actual decisions she must make, as the boys would phrase it, off her own bat.

The train puffed out of the station. Thought grew inconsequent; and remained so until she arrived at Harrow. There, one of the flymen recognised her. But it was still early; and she decided to walk to the school; taking the hill road rather than the hill path because of her long skirts.

§ 4

The weather, cloudy when Charlotte had left London, was improving. Halfway up the hill, sun shone through young leaves. By the time she reached Speech Room she began to wish she had taken that fly.

Here, the pavement narrowed under a high wall of rose-red brick. She crossed the road; stood for a moment, her back to Chapel, looking between Moss' and the house which had been Dame Armstrong's at Bill Yard and Old Schools.

For the moment, she seemed to have Harrow to herself; and, just for another moment, it seemed to her that she saw her husband, still a boy, coming down between those red brick pillars, through the open gates and across the roadway that led to the steps and the narrow pavement.

"Absurd", she thought. Because, after all, she had never even met John till he was thirty-two.

Her hallucination—of course it had been only a hallucination—vanished to a rush of feet from Old Schools. Walking quickly on again—she had no wish for her meeting with her sons to take place in public—she reached the door of Headmasters.

The butler who answered her ring seemed to have been on the look-out for her.

"If you will come this way, m'lady", he said; and, having led her along a passage and through another door, "The headmaster asked me to say he would very much like a few words with you before you see Sir John and Mr. Philip".

It took Charlotte an appreciable second to realise that "Sir

John" meant Johnny. By then the butler was offering his "respectful condolences". She thanked him; and he withdrew.

Solitary in this known room, with the slope of sunlit garden beyond its windows, she again felt the weight of her responsibilities. In a year or so, John—she *must* train herself to think of him as John—would be a grown man. Had she sufficient knowledge of the world to advise a grown man? Would John take her advice—even if she were capable of giving it?

"A good boy", she thought. "None better. But he's got all his father's obstinacy. And we've never been really intimate."

Thinking thus, she heard the door open, and turned to hold out her hand to the Head, who seemed taller than ever in his gown.

He, too, condoled, in that pleasant voice, with that curious upward twitch at one corner of his clean-shaven lips. Once again she appreciated the strength of this man, the humanity and the kindness.

"I feel sure you did the right thing, Lady Carteret", he went on, after she had thanked him, "in allowing John and Philip to rejoin at the beginning of term. Here, they have had less time to brood."

Then he asked her to sit down; and excused himself, "I do hope you will not think I am exercising an undue prerogative. But I felt it my duty, no less to your sons than to all the boys, to have just a few words with you; to ask you if you could help me".

And there he hesitated, leaning towards her, hands together, both elbows resting on his knees, before he continued, "John showed me your telegram. I gather that you only arrived in England last night. So perhaps you do not realise the bitterness of public opinion in this country. Possibly", with another upward twitch at the corner of the mouth, "you yourself are still feeling bitter?"

Charlotte, in her turn, hesitated.

"It's rather difficult not to", she said at last.

"I realise that. But—does it help? And will it help John or Philip if you—communicate your indignation to them?"

Perhaps you will think that over. And one more point. John and Philip are not the only ones. I have another boy, in my own house, who lost his elder brother. The rumour is that he was ordered out of one of the boats, although there were plenty of places in her."

"That did happen in some cases", said Charlotte. "But there was a reason for it. All the boats had the order to wait once they had been lowered. They were to have been filled from the cargo ports."

"Will you tell your sons that? Please. And anything else which you think may be"—once more the hesitation—"consolatory."

Not for nothing was Charlotte Carteret a schoolmistress' daughter.

"I quite understand", she said, with a grave smile. "And thank you. I should have thought all this out for myself. But somehow or other I didn't."

It was the Reverend Nathaniel's turn to smile.

"If you don't mind my saying so", he concluded, "you are a little young to think of everything."

He took her hand again; held it for a short moment. Then he rose; walked to the fireplace, and rang the bell.

CHAPTER EIGHT

§ 1

CHARLOTTE appreciated the tact with which the Head had excused himself after sending his butler to summon John and Philip. Tactful, too, had been that permission to use his private garden ("It's always easier, I think, to talk in the open air"), and that last, "They need not be back till lock-up. I've signed them off both bills".

Yet somehow—alone again in this quiet sunlit room—she almost caught herself wishing that the headmaster had stayed.

Unwontedly, her nerves seemed out of control. Unwillingly, she kept remembering that, "If you don't mind my saying so, you are a little young to think of everything".

Then she heard the feet down the passage; and the two boys were into the room.

They stood in the doorway for a moment—each a little short for his age—John the stocky image of his father, except that his cheeks were unlined and that no moustache hid his stubborn mouth; Philip darker, slimmer, with her own blue eyes. She realised, as Philip closed the door, that this was the first time she had seen him in swallowtails; and that John was even more nervous than she herself.

John approached her awkwardly. He said, "Hallo, mater". She held out her arms to him. He hesitated a moment before he came to her. She wondered, vaguely, how long it could be since they had drifted out of the habit of kissing each other; and marvelled at the sudden pressure of his fingers, the quick, "Poor mater, it must have been simply ghastly", before he let her go.

Philip's kiss was given a little more readily. His hand clung to hers. She found herself saying, "I hope you're

neither of you angry with me for not catching the first boat home”.

She stopped there. Philip said, “Of course not”. John added, “We couldn’t help wondering, though. At least until we got your letter”.

Silence fell on them.

“The Vansuythens”, said Charlotte suddenly, “wouldn’t even let me stay one night in New York. They motored me straight to Philadelphia.”

“What—all the way?” Philip had a passion for motor cars.

His mother explained. New York had been too horrible. “Nothing but cameras and reporters.” She had felt in need of a rest. And of course there had been clothes to buy.

John interrupted, almost brutally, “Mater, there’s something we both want to know. Whose fault was it?”

Silence fell again.

“I can’t tell you that”, said Charlotte finally. “We shall have to wait for the result of the inquiry. But I can tell you one thing. All the men I saw behaved magnificently. Especially—your father.”

John went very white. Then he flushed to the eyebrows. She saw Philip’s hands clench. Neither spoke.

“You should both be proud of him”, she went on. “Always.”

Still, neither of the boys spoke; and it was she who had to suggest, “Shall we go into the garden? The Head said we might”.

“Perhaps that would be better”, said John.

§ 2

John led the way into the open air.

As he took her arm, Charlotte said, “I brought two magazines for you. I’ve left them on the sofa”.

Philip walked quickly back into the house. John asked, “Would it hurt you to tell us the whole story?”

His selflessness touched her. Suddenly he seemed man rather than schoolboy—and a man on whom one could almost lean.

"Is that what you both want?" she asked.

"Yes. We talked it over last night. It's better knowing. Otherwise, you see, one imagines things."

Philip rejoined them. He took her other arm. Usually, when one was so near the house, one could hear boys talking to one another in their rooms. But not today.

Charlotte realised that her two sons had taken charge of her; that they were steering her beyond sight as well as beyond earshot of their fellows. Presently they found a bench, shaded by young leaves; and indicated that she should sit there.

Below them, fields sloped green to the road and Ducker. But her eyes did not give her that picture. Instead she saw the boat deck, the rockets shuddering up from the bridge.

It proved difficult to begin her story. She felt that she was telling it badly, baldly. Yet the two faces showed her that they were seeing her pictures clearly; and, every now and then, a young hand touched hers as though with complete understanding. When she had finished, she realised that both her hands were being held, and that Philip's eyes had moistened but not John's.

Gradually the boys' hands on hers relaxed; let go. Gradually the nervous tension of which she had been aware ever since they had first faced her in the doorway began to pass.

"It makes one feel better", said John suddenly, "to know that the pater behaved so frightfully well. As you say, he must have known all the time. But of course he couldn't tell you. You wouldn't have gone otherwise."

"Oh, yes, she would", said Philip. "She'd have had to. Because of us."

For the moment curiosity subdued grief.

"I'm right, aren't I?" went on Philip.

Charlotte hesitated over her answer. John, with a rough tact, broke in, "There are one or two things I'd like to know. You said Mercy was asleep nearly all the time you were in the boat. But that hardly seems possible. After all it isn't as if she were quite a baby."

"The nurse had given her a bromide", explained Charlotte. "I only found that out afterwards."

"And what about——" John hesitated ; then he mentioned a name. "How did he come to be saved ?"

"Yes. And——"

Philip had mentioned another name. It was time to exercise authority. She searched for a phrase, saying finally, "Do you think it's fair to ask me those kind of questions ?"

Both boys flushed. Both said, "Sorry, mater"; and John, "But you don't quite realise what people have been saying".

"Oh, yes, I do." Charlotte made a movement to rise. "But I think it's"—there was only one word which could influence them—"pretty caddish."

She rose. Philip was on his feet, too. John, however, remained seated for a long quarter of a minute.

"Do you really think that ?" asked John, looking up at her.

"I do. And I'm sure your father would agree with me."

Her words seemed to galvanise him. He sprang up. He looked at Philip.

"The mater's quite right", he said ; and, very queerly for a boy only just seventeen, "One oughtn't to judge people unless one knows all the facts, and even then it's jolly difficult."

Philip said, "Oh, rather".

Charlotte asked, "And now what about some lunch ?"

§ 3

Philip, who had run up to his room to leave the magazines, joined John and Charlotte when they were a few yards from the house. As the three of them passed Moretons, a very tall youth took off the black and white straw hat of the Eleven. Charlotte stopped and shook hands with him. He said, "I was most awfully sorry to hear about Sir John"; and asked after her mother.

"Hendersons have got three flannels already", said Philip when they were walking on again. "We ought to have four by Lord's. Granny will be jolly bucked if we do. It'll be a record."

John, who "hadn't much use for cricket", interrupted, "I suppose you're going down to granny's pretty soon".

"Tomorrow, I thought."

"You'd better stay the night. It'll be jolly tiring for you otherwise. Will you go straight from there to the Manor?"

"I can't do that. I shall have to be in town for a bit. Uncle George and Uncle Herbert say there'll be a great many documents for me to sign."

"Yes. Of course. There would be. Have they got probate yet?"

"What on earth's probate?" asked Philip; and Charlotte, too, was surprised at the question.

"Not yet", she answered.

"Probate", explained John, turning to Philip, "is proving a will. Uncle George told me all about it when he came down to see us."

This brought them, up and along the curving High Street, to the little railed grass-patch, the dog kennel and the sign-board of the King's Head. They went in to the hotel; and separated to wash. As she powdered her face before the mirror in the bedroom to which she had been shown, Charlotte once more remembered the headmaster's comment on her own youth.

Thirty-five—she caught herself thinking—was no age nowadays. And so far she could not perceive a single wrinkle, a single graying hair.

"You might be John's sister", thought continued; and that was when she first realised that "Johnny" no longer existed. In her mind, at any rate, her eldest son had come to manhood. And suddenly she grew conscious of loving him after a new fashion, almost jealously, because now he was so absolutely her own.

All the four children—it came to Charlotte as she sat down to luncheon—were now absolutely her own. She no longer shared them with a father.

The new thought gave her a strange pleasure. Power—she mused—might be the compensation for responsibility. She had always ridden a better line in the hunting field on the days her husband wasn't out!

Meanwhile, with other parents lunching other sons, talk became less intimate. Turkey and Italy were still at war. The Italians had just occupied Rhodes. They discussed that.

Talk turned on the cadet corps. Philip said, "John's just been made a sergeant. He ought to go into the army".

John said, "Not me. You know jolly well——" and scowled at his younger brother, who changed the conversation.

Charlotte grew aware of some secret between the two; and, immediately after they had finished luncheon, Philip announced, "I—er—thought I'd go down and watch the cricket. There's rather a good match on this afternoon".

John said, "Yes. You cut along. Find in my room at about four".

The obvious strategy made Charlotte smile. She paid the waiter for their lunch.

"Well?" she asked. "What's it all about?"

"Oh, lots of things, mater. Do you mind if we go back to the house?"

§ 4

Last term, John—already in Lower Sixth—had moved into a single room, which he had decorated after his own serious fashion, with brown wall paper, red curtains, a set of shooting prints—he was no great horselover—and a dark oak bookshelf.

The "fez" of the house football eleven and a coloured scarf hung from a hook in the door. The fez dropped as he and his mother entered the room.

"Damn", said John. "It always does that."

He swore rarely. Charlotte, seating herself in the creaking wicker chair by the bed which folded against the wall, could see that he was again ill at ease. He hung up the cap and made play of straightening a picture. Then he thrust his hands into his trouser pockets; leaned his back against the table, and began:

"I've been thinking a lot since the pater died. Do you mind if I ask you something?"

"Wouldn't it be better if you sat down before you began the—catechism?"

"Well, yes. Perhaps it would."

He took one hand out of its pocket, and drew up a hard chair.

"It seems a rotten thing to ask", he went on. "But how are

we going to be off for money? I mean, shall we be much poorer? There are death duties and things, aren't there?"

She told him as much as she knew. He cogitated a while.

"That sounds all right", he said at last. "But who gets it all?"

Again—wondering a little—she told him as much as she knew; ending, "So, you see, you've got nothing to worry about till you're twenty-one. And after that, you can do what you like with everything except the Manor, because that can't be sold".

John cogitated once more; then, saying, "You don't mind, but I'd just like to work all that out", he walked to the table and began to write.

When he came back to her, he held a piece of paper in his hand.

"Tell me if I've got it correct."

He read out his figures; and, after she had told him, "That sounds all right, but I'm not very good at mathematics", he frowned.

"That's what I've been afraid of." His voice was low, with a harsh undertone. "It isn't fair. Really it isn't. Why should I have so much more than the others? And I don't think it's a bit right that you should have less if you marry again. After all, you're almost bound to."

He stopped. In her surprise she asked, "My dear, what on earth makes you think that?"

John answered, boyishly and without thinking, "Because you're such a stunner". It was the first compliment he had ever paid her. Suddenly she felt shy with him; and the shyness made her severe.

"Won't there be time to jump that fence if ever we come to it?" she asked.

Shyness fell on him, too.

"Sorry, mater", he went on, the skin at the corner of his brown eyes puckering. "I oughtn't to have said that. And I suppose I oughtn't to be criticising the pater like this. But—well—the fact is, I simply can't take such a big share. Besides, I shan't need it."

He stopped again. Charlotte, smoothing her long, black

gloves across her knees, said, "That's rather an extraordinary statement. Can I be enlightened, please?"

Her eldest son smiled. He seemed altogether the boy as he continued :

"Philip and Elizabeth both said you'd have a fit when I told you. But I told them you were much too sensible. They think I'm off my head. I'm not of course. It's the only thing to do if one means to go in for politics".

"What's the only thing to do, John?"

"Why, the law, of course. I'm going to be a barrister. At least I think I am. Unless I decide to join Uncle George and Uncle Herbert. They seem to make plenty of money. Uncle Herbert told me he paid fifteen hundred pounds for that new Napier of his. I say—are you awfully shocked?"

"No. Only—haven't you made up your mind rather quickly?"

"Not really. I meant to talk to the pater about it last holidays. If you hadn't had to go to America——"

He broke off, flushing again.

"Perhaps I haven't chosen a very good time to tell you", he went on.

"On the contrary", began Charlotte; and she, too, broke off, feeling suddenly old.

She must be getting old. Otherwise why should she be so taken aback? After all, this was nineteen hundred and twelve. People had got over their Victorian prejudices against "gentlemen" working for money. Besides, John hadn't suggested anything derogatory. The Stock Exchange, for instance. A barrister, now. Yes. She could see him as that.

A solicitor, though. A baronet, a solicitor? Somehow or other, that didn't seem right. Unless, of course, he were forced to earn his own living.

After all, George, if his elder brother had not left a family, would be the new baronet. And hadn't she always prided herself on not being a snob?

John seemed to have read something of her thoughts.

"You are a bit shocked", he said.

She disputed that. Nobody disliked idle people more than she did. But there was such a thing as one's position in the

world. The Manor took a lot of looking after. It had been in the family——

"Since the Restoration", interrupted John. "But I can't see myself living there like the pater did. And then"—with his father's own stubbornness—"there *is* the money question. I should never be happy thinking that Philip and Elizabeth only had a few hundreds a year while I had thousands.

"Maurice, too", he added quickly. "After all, there are four of us, not counting you. And I wouldn't touch a penny of yours even if—I mean, on any account."

And on that, abruptly, his mood changed; the harshness went out of his voice; and, stooping, he put an arm round her shoulders, kissed her clumsily on the cheek.

"Let me have my own way, mater", he pleaded.

The sense of power left her; only her sense of responsibility and the new fashion of her love for him remained.

"I couldn't stop you even if I wanted to", she laughed.

"But I should hate to do anything you didn't want me to."

"And there's such a lot of time for you to reconsider your decision. Why, you won't be leaving Harrow for another year. And then there'll be four at Cambridge."

"Oh, quite." He straightened himself. "But a fellow likes to know where he's going."

A fag knocked on the door; entered to ask, "I say, Carteret, will it be all right if I lay the tea things?"

John answered, "Yes. Go ahead".

"A fellow likes to know where he's going", thought Charlotte. "How often I remember his father using that very phrase."

§ 5

Some two hours later Charlotte leaned out of the train to catch her last glimpse of the boys. John, once Philip came back for tea, had kept their talk to home or school affairs. Except for that quiet, "I think we ought to put up a tablet in Chapel—that's to say if they'll let us", he had not mentioned his father again.

The idea of the tablet pleased her. John—the old John—would like such a memorial. She would write to Mr. Bridges

about it. She fell to considering an inscription, "He gave his life for others".

But with her last glimpse of the white spire on that high hill thoughts of the old John gave place to thoughts of the new; and she began to reproach herself because she had been too preoccupied with the career her eldest son had sketched for himself to appreciate his unselfishness.

And yet, could she allow him to be so unselfish? He *was* the eldest. He had succeeded to the title. Therefore, he ought to have most of the money.

Perhaps he would realise this himself when he grew older. One must make allowances for the chivalry of youth.

All the same—and the more she recalled of their conversation, the clearer this seemed to her—John's decision could not have been made light-heartedly. From childhood on, he had always been slow-moving, obstinate—and generous to a fault, except with Maurice.

On which she recalled her intention to tackle him about his last quarrel with Maurice, forgotten all day.

One other duty, too, had slipped her memory—the tips that both her boys must have been expecting. And, back at Montpelier Square, she went straight to the desk in the morning room, writing John's cheque for five pounds and Philip's for three.

These, after some thought, she put in the same envelope, addressed to John, scribbling the enclosure, "With mother's love. Sorry I was so forgetful. C. C".

The note seemed a little curt. Going to bed early, after a dreary dinner with Laura, she again reproached herself. Now that the children were all hers, she must not be stand-offish with them. If she wanted their confidences, she must be prepared to give her own.

"Why couldn't I tell John how generous I think him?" she meditated. "Why couldn't I say that I've no objection to his becoming a barrister, if that's what he's set his heart on?"

§ 6

That night, for the first time in many years, Sir John Carteret's widow knelt to pray. But her prayers seemed inadequate. Neither could she believe them efficacious.

And, once in bed, she could not concentrate her mind on her book.

Life was so much more involved than any book. Take just the one instance—love.

There were so many different manifestations, so many different intensities of love. But always the intellect sat in judgment.

"Always?" she asked herself.

Intellect answered, "Of course". But conscience was not quite satisfied with that answer. Conscience demanded that she hark back eleven years.

"As long ago as that!" she thought; and, with just a touch of desperation, "I was a good wife to him. I always made him happy. He told me so. That was almost the last thing he said to me."

Just before she fell asleep, however, she remembered John's, "You wouldn't have gone otherwise", and Philip's, "She'd have had to, because of us", and a husband and wife she had seen, both of them very old, standing arm in arm while the boats were being lowered.

So quietly, so determinedly, that wife had refused to be parted from that husband. Would she? Even if there had been no Johnny, no Philip, no Elizabeth and no Maurice?

"Answer that question", demanded conscience. But intellect retorted, "You did your duty. So why worry about abstract truths?"

CHAPTER NINE

§ 1

GERTRUDE HENDERSON's husband had lost his life in the Swiss Alps, leaving her a modest capital and the preparatory school which bore his name, while Victoria still ruled. Ever since, his widow had modelled herself, to the awe of most beholders, on the great queen.

Nominally, Hendersons responded to the control of a headmaster, nine junior masters, and a matron. Actually even the Reverend Septimus Holdsworth was only a subordinate minister, kneeling before Gertrude's throne.

Only in chapel might the Reverend Septimus—a mild-looking man in his early forties—be granted precedence. Morning prayers over, and breakfast on the seven tables in the long dining hall, the queen resumed her sceptre.

"I shall require the landau", said the queen to her butler as he poured her a second cup of tea on this particular morning; and to her minister, "My daughter, Lady Carteret, is arriving on the eleven twenty-five".

Presently—there being no grace after breakfast—she swept from hall and into her own apartments. There she received Miss Pontifex, the matron, who reported two colds and a slightly sprained ankle.

Gertrude Henderson ordered the two colds to be "kept in". The sprained ankle should be given a stick, and bandaged with cold water "between schools".

"Talbot always tries to get out of playing cricket", reflected Mrs. Henderson. "If he is still limping tomorrow, you had better send for Doctor Thwaites."

"Pontius Pilate", as she was irreverently known, departed. Mr. Noakes, the games master, demanded audience. The question of colours for the second eleven was discussed.

"It might be an incentive", suggested Cyril Noakes.

"I dislike innovations", said the queen; and looked at one of her late husband's photographs—a sign that the petition was dismissed.

The games master departed to take Middle Shell in geography. Mrs. Jameson, the cook, received her orders. It was time for Gertrude Henderson to visit the various classrooms.

But this morning those visits were perfunctory—a mere appearance in the doorway, a mere, "You can sit down, boys", until she came to the room where Monsieur Lebrun, the new French master, was just introducing Middle Fifth to "Colomba".

Monsieur Lebrun's form stood strictly to attention. Gertrude approached the desk and the blackboard.

"I trust", she said grimly, "that there have been no more cases of insubordination."

The young Parisian, stroking a neat beard, said that he had been pleased to observe an improvement in behaviour. The queen turned to the class, and once more reminded them that they were the sons of gentlemen.

"A sound knowledge of French", she continued, "is an essential part of a gentleman's education. You will now sit down and continue your studies. Carteret!"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You will be excused twelve o'clock school."

"Thank you, ma'am."

Mrs. Henderson swept out. Charlotte's youngest whispered to his neighbour on the hard bench, "*Ma grandmère me fait beaucoup rire toujours. Je n'ai pas peur de elle*".

§ 2

Gradually, as the two brown horses trotted her along Seaside Avenue, Gertrude Henderson's mind grew a little less regal. Her poor Charlotte. Her poor grandchildren. But it was no use giving way to grief.

If God had seen fit to take Charlotte's husband, God knew his own business. Just as she, Gertrude Henderson, knew hers. And her business, now, was to see that Charlotte brought

up her fatherless children properly. Especially Maurice, who looked like being "a bit of a handful".

Still, what a nice leg-break the boy bowled. He was a good bat, too. Nobody could accuse her of favouritism if she did make him captain of the second eleven. Especially as the second eleven were not to have colours.

And "that Lebrun" said Maurice had a natural aptitude for foreign languages, if only he would be "*plus sérieux*".

"The young scamp", she mused; and her rather heavy lips relaxed to one of their rare smiles.

Her progress down the Avenue was interrupted by one of the "new" motor omnibuses which appeared to her—from the steam pouring out of its radiator—as though it might be going to blow up. Secretly—as her pair edged past the little crowd which had gathered—Gertrude Henderson hoped that this might happen. There were far too many of these horseless carriages about nowadays. Parents thought nothing of coming all the way from London in them. And the radicals were in power. Before one knew it there might be Home Rule and Votes for Women.

Alighting at the station, she remembered—with almost the same horror that she remembered the first Hendersonian becoming an actor—that Charlotte was a suffragette.

The train—a porter informed her—would be ten minutes late. For this she blamed Mr. Asquith. One could scarcely expect the lower orders to perform their duties properly under such a government.

At which precise point in her meditations, Charlotte's mother began to wonder whether by any chance she could be growing old-fashioned—an idea which seemed all the more curious when she reminded herself that she had been almost the first to instal a telephone in Middlehampton, just after the Boer War.

"In my position", she told herself with some severity, "one has a duty to be up-to-date"; and, to show her broad-mindedness, she approached the bookstall, opened her reticule, took out a halfpenny, and demanded the *Daily Mail*.

This, retiring to the first-class waiting room, she studied in solitary grandeur till the train was signalled. Then, however,

she abandoned the "new journalism", carefully refolded, on the shiny leather seat.

Her first sight of Charlotte, just stepping from a distant carriage, reminded her, as always, of her husband. Arthur, too, had been tall—and inclined to let his sense of humour get the better of him. Poor Arthur. His own fault, though. Hadn't she protested, over and over again, about his "ridiculous passion for mountaineering"?

Meanwhile their daughter was approaching; and Gertrude decided this to be one of the peculiar occasions on which a public kiss could be permitted.

"I am glad to see", she said, the kiss and the preliminary inspection over, "that you are looking so well."

§ 3

The motor omnibus was still stationary in the Avenue. Passing it, Mrs. Henderson allowed herself a grim chuckle.

"Nasty smelly things", she ejaculated. "I'll never get used to them. In London, I understand, you have nothing else."

Charlotte smiled. Her mother was a character. And characteristically she had not yet mentioned John's death. She had not even mentioned Maurice, or Elizabeth, whose school—Miss Hornibrook's—lay behind them, on West Shore.

"And how is Maurice?" she asked diffidently.

"In the best of health, but as difficult as ever. Holdsworth"—Gertrude always referred to her subordinates by the bare surname—"had to threaten to deal with him before he had been back twenty-four hours."

The elder woman regarded the silver buttons on her coachman's back.

The younger woman knew that sign too well to continue the conversation. "In another minute", she thought, "mother will say, '*Prenez garde. Il y a les domestiques.*'" And, oh, dear—mother's clothes: that bonnet: that cape: that brooch with the lock of father's hair.

Thinking thus as they turned off the Avenue down the half-

mile of stucco-fronted houses, each in its own neat acre of ground, which ended at the school, Charlotte felt the memories of childhood overwhelm her. She saw herself, a girl of seven, marched along this very road towards Miss Hornibrook's; heard the maid who accompanied her saying, "Now, don't you be a tell-tale-tit if I stop and talk to my young man for a moment". And at sixteen there had been her own young man. Rupert Whittinghame.

Sharply, she recollected telling Rupert—had it been under that very laburnum tree?—"All right. If you make fifty for the old boys against the masters tomorrow, I'll let you kiss me", and thinking, "I don't know why I'm making such a fuss about it, after all we're second cousins".

And there, on that field whose white palings she could now see, Rupert in his dark blue cap had scored his fifty. She had a vision of herself clapping these very hands.

How curiously guilty she had felt, giving Rupert his promised kiss!

She could see the whole school now—the three red brick connected wings that housed masters and boys, the sloping glass which roofed the gymnasium, that other building, also of red brick, but lower, with its private way into the chapel where she had been confirmed.

"Queer", she thought, "how small it all looks now that one's a grown woman."

The landau swung left and circled behind the school, giving her a glimpse of little boys at their desks. The coachman reined in his horses. Her mother said, "We will have a glass of sherry and a biscuit before I send for Maurice".

Once again memories overwhelmed Charlotte as she followed through the low porch into the "private wing".

§ 4

"We will have a proper talk", began Mrs. Henderson, loosening the strings of her bonnet, as she sipped her dry sherry, "this evening. I need not tell you, my dear, that you have all my sympathy. To lose the man one loves, the father of one's children, cut off in his prime, is a

catastrophe. But what you and I have to consider is the future and not the past. You agree with me, I hope."

"Of course, mother", said Charlotte.

"Good."

The queen glanced round her over-furnished drawing room. Her eyes came to rest on the last of her husband's photographs—taken in Switzerland a few days before his death.

"I speak from experience", she went on. "As your dear father was wont to say, 'We must pass on the torches'. Your youth is over. At your age, and with four children, it is hardly likely that you will remarry. Fortunately, however, you have me to advise you. I do not anticipate that you will have difficulties with Johnny. If I am any judge of character his is not the type which tends to the sowing of wild oats.

"Philip, however"—Mrs. Henderson took another sip of sherry—"may be more of a problem. He is a boy of some originality. I was looking up his reports last night, and came upon the following, 'Painstaking when interested, otherwise lacks application'. I remember, too, that if there was one thing which did not interest Philip when I had charge of him, it was the study of the classics. Elizabeth's tendencies, I have no doubt, you will discuss with Miss Hornibrook."

And there Charlotte's mother, who had lost a good deal of her pristine admiration for Miss Hornibrook since that lady had avowed herself in favour of "the movement", sniffed before continuing :

"I think you would be well advised to let Elizabeth finish in Paris. But that, too, we will discuss later. For the moment, I wish to talk about Maurice".

Mrs. Henderson talked about Maurice for the best part of ten minutes. The child had excellent qualities. In many ways, indeed, whether scholastically or athletically, he could be described as brilliant. But—and it was a big but, of which his mother must never lose sight—Maurice had no sense of discipline. One might almost say that he enjoyed being disobedient.

"And I am afraid", she concluded, almost as though she were reading the Communion Service, "that his heart will always rule his head."

§ 5

Her mother's summing-up of her youngest son's character—though she could not help admitting the justice of it—annoyed Charlotte. Her mother's whole attitude, in fact, had proved annoying ; and all the more so because she understood what lay behind it—an attempt to resume that very authority from which she had escaped by an early marriage.

Realising—almost for the first time—how much that urge to escape from maternal authority had influenced her marriage, her immediate impulse was to re-assert her independence.

Second thoughts, however, decided both the time and the place inopportune. For by then Gertrude Henderson, with a last, "If you intend to take the young scamp out to lunch, you can have the horses. It will be cheaper for you than hiring a public conveyance", had rung the bell.

CHAPTER TEN

§ 1

HER meeting with John and Philip—Charlotte could not help remembering—had been rather constrained. Maurice, despite his immaturity and the forbidding presence of his grandmother, seemed completely at ease.

The moment the butler closed the door behind him, he came straight over to her, saying, "O mumsey, it is lovely to see you", and, when she put her arms round him, he gave her kiss for kiss.

"Are we going out to lunch?" he asked. "Is Elizabeth coming too?"

"Yes, dear."

She saw that he was wearing a black tie, and a deep band of crape round the left sleeve of his gray flannel jacket. Even in the month since she said goodbye to him, he seemed to have grown taller.

"It was dreadful about daddy", he went on. "But I didn't blub much. Lollie did. She blubbed all night. I expect that's why she made me sleep in her room."

Mrs. Henderson's eyes expressed disapproval; Maurice's, dark and precociously intelligent, only the frankness of childhood.

"Oughtn't one to talk about it?" he asked, looking at his grandmother. "John didn't seem to think I ought to. He didn't like my drawing a picture of you and daddy on the ship, either. I suppose you've seen him and Philip already."

"Yes. I saw them yesterday."

"Did John say anything about the row we had?"

Mrs. Henderson interrupted, "You appear to have forgotten your cap".

"Oh, no, granny, I didn't. I hung it up outside."

Neither John nor Philip—Gertrude Henderson remembered—had ever dared to call her “granny” except during the holidays. To them, even when they came to tea in the private wing, she had remained “ma’am”.

“I should never have permitted them to”, she brooded. “So why do I let this one? The young pickle. I oughtn’t to be so fond of him. What pretty hair he has. Just like Charlotte’s when she was the same age. Or is it even lighter?”

Yes.

It was lighter.

Almost gold.

And it didn’t really remind her of Charlotte’s. It reminded her of some other boy’s.

Now whose?

§ 2

Maurice, in the landau, continued talkative. His grief seemed to have gone over, leaving only curiosity behind. He wanted to know, “All about everything. And were you very frightened, mumsey? Elizabeth says she’d have been terrified. But I don’t expect you were. You’re ever so much pluckier than she is. Will you be able to hunt this year? Or mustn’t one when one’s in mourning?”

Doing her best to answer his questions, she again remembered John and Philip, wondering why she should find it so much less difficult to talk to him than to them.

“I always have”, she thought. “Even when he was quite a baby.”

Meanwhile the horses trotted soberly on, back along Seaside Avenue towards West Shore.

Here, too, were memories of her own childhood. Over those far Downs, she had galloped her first pony. In that square house under the lee of them—where the rails of the parade ended and the tamarisk hedge began—she had first planned “going to a university”.

Quite an adventure, in those far-off days, for a girl to go to Girton. Her mother had been right. Her youth was over. Why, she could remember the decorations Miss Hornibrook had put up for the Golden Jubilee—eighteen eighty-seven—and her father’s sermon that Sunday.

Yet John—her unimaginative son—had considered the possibility of her remarrying. What was it John had called her? “A stunner.” Well, of course, she still had her looks.

Thought grew impersonal as they drove through the open gates and up to this school which was now Elizabeth’s. The front door stood open. She left Maurice in the carriage and went in—knowing that her daughter would not be far away.

Almost at once Elizabeth came running down the stairs.

“You are late”, she chided. “They’ve all gone in to lunch. But I suppose granny kept you.”

The kiss—Charlotte thought—might have been warmer. As with John, as with Philip, she was conscious of a constraint.

“I’m sorry”, she said.

“It doesn’t really matter.”

Elizabeth smiled; and the smile, as always, revealed her latent attraction. In another year or so, this rather dumpy girl in the hideous school-clothes would be a very different personality.

“It doesn’t really matter”, she repeated. “Only, I rather wanted to talk to you. And Maurice is sure to be ravenous.”

“I had to bring him”, said Charlotte, understanding the thought behind the speech. “But he’ll be all right where he is for a few minutes. Where shall we go?”

“In here.”

Elizabeth indicated a vacant classroom; and closed the door behind them as they went in.

“I had a letter from Dwight”, she began. “It came when yours did. He says father saved his life. Is that true?”

“Yes, dear.”

Elizabeth stood silent. Her eyes, of the same brown as John’s, were suffusing.

“I thought Dwight might have been exaggerating”, she said at last; and, very queerly, “Mother, were you ever in love? Before you married father, I mean.”

Charlotte hesitated.

“It makes one frightfully selfish”, went on Elizabeth; and suddenly her handkerchief was at her eyes.

For a moment Charlotte let her cry. Then she folded her in her arms.

After a little, the sobs checked ; and Elizabeth said :

"Do you understand, mother ? I thought you might. Because you're so clever."

"Not quite, I'm afraid. Are you trying to tell me that you're in love with Dwight Mansfield ?"

"Yes. But that isn't what really matters. And anyway he doesn't love me back. How could he ? I'm not nearly pretty enough. What really matters—only it's so frightfully difficult to explain—is that I couldn't care about father until I knew Dwight was safe.

"It might have been different if it had been you." Charlotte's daughter broke loose ; faced her, hands working, eyes upturned. "But I can't be sure. Even about that. And it's made me feel—oh—beastly. All wrong with myself. You see, supposing father knows."

The young voice broke ; stopped dead. Completely taken aback, Charlotte could find nothing to say. That Elizabeth, only just confirmed, took religion rather seriously, she knew. But that Elizabeth, at sixteen, should have fallen in love with Dwight Mansfield seemed utterly impossible. Why, he and Aurelia had only stayed at the Manor for a few days. And the rest ? These obscurer workings of an overstrained conscience ?

"Laughable", thought Charlotte. "Childish." And her impulse was to pretend anger ; till she remembered Rupert—and herself at this very age.

Elizabeth was still speechless. She had averted her eyes. Charlotte's intuition began to tell her—with a curious insistence—how much hung on the next few moments.

"They may alter her whole life", she knew ; and in a little she heard a voice which hardly seemed her own say :

"Aren't you blaming yourself unnecessarily ? We can none of us help our feelings. The best we can do is try not to let them influence our behaviour".

"But supposing father does know." The young face would not turn. "Supposing he's hating me for it."

Once more Charlotte hesitated. Then, slowly, she put out a hand and laid it on her daughter's shoulder.

"Your father never hated anyone while he was alive", she said. "And if I understand, surely he will."

"Then you really do understand?"

"Yes."

"O mother, aren't you wonderful?"

The face had turned now. It was very close to hers. Stooping, kissing those fresh lips, she grew conscious—once again—of loving her children after a new fashion.

Even though this one child might not be absolutely her own.

§ 3

The thought that Elizabeth, who had hitherto been even more hers than Maurice, was no longer absolutely her own—that the precocious love for Dwight Mansfield need not of necessity be transient—haunted Charlotte Carteret's mind for the rest of the afternoon.

After lunch at the Queen's Hotel, during which he monopolised most of the conversation, and a stroll along the sea front, and tea at the Creameries, where he distinguished himself by eating five eclairs, Maurice announced that he must have, "An hour at the nets; because, you see, mumsey, it's so awfully important to practise *every* day—except Sundays, of course—and I don't see why we shouldn't play on Sundays, it's jolly dull only having walks—if I'm to get my flannels when I go to Harrow".

Accordingly Charlotte and Elizabeth took him back to Hendersons in what Gertrude described as a "public conveyance"; and thereafter Charlotte, having paid off the flyman, walked her daughter back to Hornibrooks, thinking, "Now I shall hear more about this absurd business with Dwight".

Elizabeth, however, vouchsafed no further confidences. Only just before they parted did she say, "I feel quite different now I've told you everything—ever so much happier", and when Charlotte, taking refuge in humour, retorted, "Don't let being in love interfere with your work", she laughed, "Of course I shan't. The Horner won't let me".

"The Horner", too, tactfully questioned after their parting—in a room that held still more memories—reported, "Naturally I've kept my eyes open for emotional disturbances. But I'm glad to say there's been hardly a sign of them. Nothing

more than one would expect. In fact rather less. She's playing her hardest, and she's working her hardest".

All the same, Charlotte was perturbed; and dressing for a solitary dinner with her mother, she fell to wondering whether it might not be better to withdraw Elizabeth from Hornibrooks at the end of the term.

"Safer at home?" she brooded. "Safer with me?"

Maurice, who had wheedled permission to "say good night to my mother" from Pontius Pilate, interrupted her brooding. There was something—said Maurice, playing with one of her hammered silver hair brushes—which he had forgotten to ask her. Could he have a second cricket bat? They broke sometimes. It would be jolly awkward if that were to happen in the middle of a match.

The boon granted, he went off to bed, and Charlotte's thoughts returned to the problem of Elizabeth.

"Like mother, like daughter", she thought, making a last inspection of herself in the awkward mirror. But was that quite true? Wasn't Elizabeth's the franker nature? She, Charlotte, had never told her mother about . . . about Rupert.

Confound Rupert. Why couldn't she get him out of her mind?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

§ 1

Still thoughtful, Charlotte made her way downstairs. The evening had brought a sea mist. At home she would have demanded a fire. But her mother held to the Victorian simplicities. Fires were not lit before the first of November or after the thirty-first of March.

Dinner, washed down with one glass of cold claret, was a shivery meal during which small talk reigned supreme. Mr. Holdsworth and Mr. Noakes joined them for coffee; and were permitted a cigarette apiece.

The two masters having retired—after more small talk and some discussion of Maurice's abilities in the classroom and on the cricket field—Mrs. Henderson proceeded to lay down the law for young widows with families.

She proved irritating, but uncommonly shrewd, until she touched on the subject of daughters, whom she classed as when by or the reverse.

Accordingly you take my advice and let her finish in Paris", Hendersons in what "I do not anticipate that you will have any ance"; and thereafter Ch. She will never be a beauty, of course. walked her daughter back to of her own—at least I presume she I shall hear more about this abs. and, once she has been presented,

Elizabeth, however, vouchsafes plenty of opportunities for Only just before they parted did she man."

now I've told you everything—eved this pronouncement. when Charlotte, taking refuge in h. Charlotte rose from her let being in love interfere with your w. "Isn't it your bedtime, course I shan't. The Horner won't let asisted on accompanying "The Horner", too, tactfully questionng closed the door, she in a room that held still more memories-ning :

I've kept my eyes open for emotional dcause I haven't dwelt on glad to say there's been hardly a signout it".

And when Charlotte, strangely moved, could find nothing to say, she went on :

"You will come to me, won't you, if ever you feel lonely or whenever you're in difficulties ? I so often wonder, as I get on in years, whether, while your father was alive, I let myself love him too much, and you too little. Arthur had to come first, you see. Because he needed me so. And after he had gone—well, you were married. And your John never cared for me, even when he was here. Such a stubborn little boy. One could never get under his skin.

"Never", she repeated ; and there—for the first time Charlotte could remember—emotion dumbed her, dumbed both of them, so that they could only stare at each other ; till at last emotion drew them together, and they kissed.

"You're wrong about John, mother", Charlotte made herself say. "It may have been like that when we were first married. But not when he understood you better. Otherwise he wouldn't have sent all his boys here."

Gertrude Henderson's, "And where else could he have sent them, if you please ?" was half a sob and half a chuckle.

A moment later, with a last, "Good night, and may God bless you, my dear", she was out of the room.

§ 2

It took Charlotte a long ten minutes to recover her equanimity. Momentarily her sense of humour seemed in complete abeyance ; and her mother—so often regarded as a figure of fun—a figure of tragedy.

All her resentment, too, had gone.

"Arthur had to come first, you see." The more she considered those words—and the more she remembered her father—the more she realised their exact implication. For her father—she could see now—had always been the weaker vessel, the man leaning on his wife.

A moderately sound scholar, an athlete with flashes of brilliance, his greatest gift had been his ability to make himself popular. Without that gift he could never have attracted pupils to Hendersons. But, without her mother, what would

he have made of those pupils? Moderately sound scholars, flashily brilliant athletes like himself.

She recollected a conversation she had overheard, "But I like the lad, Gertrude. He's such a good little fellow, even if he is rather lazy", and her mother's, "His parents didn't send him here to laze. He could have done that at home".

Thought diffused; became a little inconsequent. Beginning to undress, she wondered how much of her father, how much of her mother, there might be in herself.

"I can be weak, too", she caught herself thinking; and, before she could check herself, "But not for long."

Rupert again!

Why on earth should she be thinking so much about Rupert? Because of what Elizabeth had told her about Dwight?

Sitting down to brush her long hair, she tried to concentrate on Elizabeth's feelings for Dwight—obviously a schoolgirl's infatuation accentuated by circumstance. One got over such infatuations. Did one though? Yes. *She* had. Once she had promised to marry John . . .

But on that—as not for many a year—conscience had its way with Charlotte Carteret, and the immediate present was blotted from her mind.

Once again she experienced that feeling of guilt when Rupert first kissed her—and the thrill that followed. Once again she heard him say, "The Head didn't want to give me an exeat. Wouldn't it have been ghastly if he hadn't? But I've only got one more term, thank goodness. I shall be more or less my own master once I'm up at Cambridge. I say, you will write to me, won't you?"

And of course she had written. And after that there had been the summer holiday—all thrills, every time he looked at her, every time he kissed her.

"My little sweetheart, my secret sweetheart. If only we could be openly engaged. But of course we can't. I'm not nineteen yet. And you haven't even put your hair up. Do you know, I believe I'm going to hate it when you do put your hair up, because then I shan't be able to twine it round my fingers. Charlotte, kiss me again, say that you love me."

"But, Rupert, of course I love you. I shouldn't let you kiss me if I didn't."

"Darling, what a little innocent you are. Girls can let a fellow kiss them without being in love with him."

"O Rupert, can they? How horrid. Do you want me to be that sort of girl?"

"Rather not."

The innocence of her. Of both of them. All that year.

Flashingly her mind recaptured that whole year—the letters she had kept locked in her writing case, the photograph there had been no need to hide because he and she were second cousins, that visit to Cambridge, those few stolen minutes alone in his rooms, that whole afternoon on the Backs, alone in his "Canader".

"I say, your father is a sportsman. We shouldn't have been allowed out alone if your mother had come up with him. What's all this about Girton? I can't see *you* at Girton. They're all frumps. Besides we're going to be married."

"But how can we afford to get married?"

"Well, of course, we might have to wait a year or two. I don't come into my money till I'm twenty-five."

Twenty-five. Six more years. But she'd promised to wait for him. Over and over again, she had said, "I will. Honestly I will. I simply couldn't marry anybody else, darling".

And then—she had married John . . .

§ 3

. . . It was a full five minutes since Charlotte had ceased brushing her hair. But she was still sitting at her mirror, still staring at her own face.

Why did it seem so dreadfully young, this face? Why did her heart seem so young? Why did it seem only yesterday that she had sat thus, in this very room, before this very glass, thinking, thinking, thinking, "Nearly six more years. To be under mother's thumb for all that time. But I couldn't stand it. I simply couldn't stand it. Even if she does let me go to Girton"?

And, next day, she had put her hair up. Next night, she had met John.

Flashingly her mind recaptured her whole courtship by John; and how flattered she had been when a man, a grown man, had begun to send her flowers, to write her letters.

"My dear Miss Henderson, I am so sorry that I shall not have the pleasure of meeting you again before I leave Middlehampton. I hope, however, that you and your parents will one day do me the honour of visiting me at the Manor. Meanwhile will you accept the little tribute I am sending?"

"Dear Sir John, Thank you so much for the roses. They really are lovely."

More roses.

More letters.

And her father's chaff, "Do we perceive another crested envelope on our breakfast table? But what will the handsome cousin say? If I remember rightly he was very much *épris*"; her mother's acid, "Don't put ideas into her head. She's quite conceited enough already. Let me remind you that she has not been presented yet".

Yet it had been mother who insisted on their accepting John's invitation to stay with him for Christmas, saying, "My dear Arthur, don't you have enough of Switzerland in the summer?"

"And I never even wrote to Rupert the whole time we were at the Manor", remembered Charlotte, the best part of twenty years on.

On that, she rose and walked to the window. But the movement was an automaton's; it no more affected thought than her action in raising the blind. Neither did she realise that a wind had blown away the sea mist, as she looked down on to the little patch of walled garden, where those old figures seemed to move.

One of those old figures was her own, the other Rupert's. What was she trying to tell Rupert?

"You mustn't kiss me any more. I don't want you to think about me any more. I've—I've changed my mind about marrying you."

"But, damn it, you can't do that."

So angry he had been. So incredulous. So hurt, too. And how she had hated having to hurt him ; how she had wanted to kiss him again. Just this once. Why not ? After all, she hadn't actually promised to marry John. She had only promised to "think it over". Only, if she let Rupert kiss her again, she might weaken. And she mustn't. She must be sensible. She wasn't a romantic flapper any more.

"I tell you, you *can't* do that, Charlotte. It isn't fair on *me*. I want you. You're the only creature on God's earth I do want. If you chuck me over, I don't know *what* I'll do. Go to the bad, I suppose."

"Now you're being merely silly."

"Silly ! I shouldn't wonder if you weren't right. But *you* don't know what love means. No girl of your age does. You'll be sorry one of these days."

Rupert's tall figure went dumb, vanished. Her own remained in the garden. She could actually see it walking there ; actually read its thoughts, "He had no right to talk to me like that. I'm not a child. I shall be eighteen next year. I know what I'm doing. And it isn't for the money or the title, or even because I want to have my own home and not to be under mother's thumb any longer. How dare he say I don't know what love means. It doesn't mean what he thinks—just kissing and talking nonsense".

No. Love meant having someone to look up to, someone who was stronger than oneself. A man—a real grown man—of one's very own.

And John had been her very own. Always. Such a wonderful husband. If only . . . If only . . .

The walled garden was quite empty now. Slowly the immediate present came back to her. That Charlotte, that Rupert—so young, so innocent—had been dead for the best part of twenty years. So why even remember them ?

"You know why", said conscience.

Shivering, but not with cold, she drew the blind down again ; turned the gas off ; climbed into her narrow bed . . .

§ 4

... But no sleep came to Charlotte Carteret in that narrow bed ; and every time she closed her eyes her mind gave her back more words, more pictures out of a less distant past.

Was she never to forget those words, "I can't expect you to believe it, my dear, and I'm not trying to pretend I've been faithful to your memory, but, if the Boers do happen to put another bullet into me, you might occasionally remember that you're the only woman who ever counted", and the vision of Rupert, in his khaki tunic, in his "smasher" hat.

She scarcely recognised him in that uniform and that hat. When he first saluted her, her impulse had been to bow and pass on. Why hadn't she ? Fate ?

"That's what *he* said", she remembered ; and, lying tense, she remembered other phrases he had used, the very newspaper bill which had stared at them, "Where's de Wet ?", the very dress she had been wearing, as they walked on out of Piccadilly into Hyde Park.

Fate. Perhaps ? She so rarely came to London without John. But there had been her new hunting habits to fit—and the painters in at Montpelier Square—and, of course, one couldn't expect John to give up two days' shooting.

And, after all, she'd been married to John for ever so long. Years.

She recollected how Rupert had counted the years—and how he had chaffed her for being, "An old married woman. Three children, too. Quite a family"—and how he had asked, tapping his leggings with his whip as they stood on the doorstep, "I suppose I couldn't come in for a minute ?"—and the smell of the fresh paint as they edged past the ladders into the morning room—and that queer thought, "He's going out to South Africa again. Supposing he's killed ?"—and how reckless it had made her feel—and the gleam of the September sun on his bare head as he bent to fizz the soda into his glass.

A hero. Why hadn't John gone to South Africa ? Why wasn't John in khaki, with that new medal ribbon on his left breast ?

Shameful thoughts. Disloyal thoughts. But one couldn't

help thinking them. And how handsome Rupert had grown, how manly. Had he really meant that, "You're the only woman who ever counted"? Was he still in love with one? After one had behaved so badly to him . . .

"Rupert", words spoken long ago were loud again, "you ought to be going now."

"But I don't want to go. Can't I stay another few minutes? Can't I have another whiskey and soda?"

Weak she was being. Weak! She didn't want him to stay. It was so . . . so dangerous.

"I believe you're afraid of me, Charlotte."

"My dear man, why should I be afraid of you?"

"Because you're still fond of me."

"You flatter yourself, Rupert."

"I wonder. I wonder what would happen if I kissed you. Shall I?"

"With the painters in the hall?"

"Meaning you'd scream? I bet you wouldn't. I bet you'd rather like it."

"Rupert!"

"Charlotte!"

And that queer moment when they had faced each other; when he had put his arms out, and laid his hands on her shoulders . . .

§ 5

. . . The wind that had blown away the sea mist was rising. It rattled at the window, rattled at the blind cord. But Charlotte Carteret scarcely heard the wind. Her heart was beating too loudly.

Rupert's hands on her shoulders. Rupert's face drawing closer. His lips touching her lips, fastening on them, devouring them, leaving them.

"Again, Charlotte."

"No. No."

"But you want to."

"I don't. I won't. Rupert! Go. Please go."

"Perhaps I will, if you kiss me again . . . Darling. Sweet-heart. Only woman. How lovely you are. How I've

always wanted you . . . Out there. On the veldt . . . Always. Yes. Always and always. I swear it. Charlotte!"

And his hands fondling her again; his lips devouring her lips again; and the blood beating through her, blinding her, weakening her.

"Rupert. I mustn't. I won't. It's all wrong. You must go. Darling, you really must go."

"If I go, it'll only be on one condition; that you let me come back, that you let me take you out to dinner."

"But that's impossible . . . My servants . . . If we were seen——"

"We shan't be."

And nobody had seen them.

Either that night or the next.

Nobody had known. Nobody ever could know.

Two nights! What were two nights in a whole lifetime? And so long ago. Eleven whole years ago. So why couldn't she forget about it? She *must* forget about it. She hadn't really loved Rupert. It had only been . . . What had it been?

"Passion", thought Charlotte; and suddenly she shivered again; suddenly she grew conscious that the rattles of the window and the blind cord were maddening her; that she couldn't stand them a moment longer; suddenly, she was out of bed.

The physical effort of relighting the gas, of adjusting the wedges she found on the sill, of looping the cord round its hook, calmed her. Back into bed, she no longer lay tense; and gradually her intellect began to work; gradually her whole adventure with Rupert—since after all it had only been an adventure—fell into truer perspective.

Why all these pangs of conscience, just because, at three and twenty, she had lost her head?

"That's all it was", she decided. "And mainly because of the war. Thinking he might be killed; that I might never see him again. Poor old Rupert. Perhaps it would have been better if he had been killed. What a mess he's made of his life. Throwing away all his chances."

But she hadn't thrown away her chances. She had gone back, just as though nothing had happened, to John.

§ 6

Later that night, with sleep just closing her eyelids, Charlotte thought, "I'm so glad I went back to John. I'm so glad I was sensible. I must bring all the children up to be sensible. Like John. Not like Rupert".

Such a fool, poor Rupert. No balance. No sense of proportion.

"Balance", she thought. "Proportion. Even when one loves people."

And on that, she slept.

CHAPTER TWELVE

§ 1

"I WOULDN'T have let her out on licence", said John Carteret. "I'd have made her serve her full sentence. Dash it all, there are limits. Blowing up people's houses ! It's no good handling women like Mrs. Pankhurst with kid gloves. Look at the result—a bomb in the Bank of England."

He took out a brand new silver case, and lit a manful cigarette. Philip watched him with the admiration of sixteen for eighteen. Nan Pettigrew said, "Man-made laws. And anyway your mother's one".

"She doesn't approve of all this violence."

"The Horner", put in Elizabeth, "says it's the only way we'll ever get the vote."

John remarked that Miss Hornibrook ought to be jolly well ashamed of herself and that it was a good thing Elizabeth should be leaving at the end of next term. His sister told him to mind his own business before she rose from the bench in the summer-house, and said, "I've got to go to the stables, Nan. Coming?"

"Yes. As John's being so tiresome."

The two girls went off arm in arm.

Philip watched them thinking, "Nan's rather a stunner now she's got her hair up, but I bet she's got an awful temper".

"Do you like her?" he asked.

"Who ? Nan ? Yes, I do rather."

"You don't usually care for girls."

John laughed, "I don't want to kiss her, if that's what you're driving at"; and went on, suddenly serious, "It doesn't seem like a whole year since the pater died".

"No."

"Do you miss him much?"

"Sometimes."

"So do I. And I simply hate being a baronet. I wish I could have abdicated or something. What's the good of having a handle to one's name? All this Sir John-ing. It makes me tired."

"Don't tell granny that or she'll think you're—what do they call 'em—a socialist", said Philip; and he, in his turn, laughed.

John threw away his Vafiadi, and stroked an embryo moustache.

"What's that little devil, Maurice, doing?" he went on.

"Practising his cricket, I expect."

"Well, let's hope it keeps him out of mischief. If he makes me another apple-pie bed, I'll whop him till he can't stand."

"He's only a kid, John. He doesn't really mean any harm."

"No. I suppose he doesn't. How about us going for a stroll?"

"Right you are."

§ 2

As Philip, his hands at the correct Harrovian depth in his trouser pockets, followed his elder brother out of the summer-house, he speculated—not for the first time during these Easter holidays—on the growing antagonism between Maurice and John.

Maurice—it always seemed to him—was a "jolly little chap" and "as plucky as they make 'em". Besides, a man of John's age—going up to Cambridge in the autumn—ought to be above taking notice of kids.

"It isn't as if John were a bully", brooded Philip.

And what about Maurice? Why couldn't he leave John alone?

"He never tries to rag me", continued Philip's thoughts. "Or Elizabeth."

But a squeal, a scuffle in the undergrowth, the sight of those two small bodies—the red and the brown—writhing out on to the path they followed, eclipsed all thought.

"That would happen when one hasn't got a gun", said John, a second or so later, with the bodies vanished, and a rabbit giving its last squeal. Philip, the quicker in his reactions, was stooping for a stone.

He flung the stone. It crashed into the undergrowth. They waited. John said, "Mother really must speak to Murdoch about keeping down the vermin". As he spoke the weasel—to their utter amazement—reappeared, about twenty yards away, dancing on its hind legs. Neither of them heard the elastic twang; both stared as the red and white body collapsed to a cry of "Got him".

Philip called, "Look out", as he saw Maurice run from behind a tree and fall on the victim of his catapult—but too late.

The weasel's teeth were home by then. Philip had to squeeze the last of the life out of it with his naked hands before he could free his younger brother's cheek.

He lifted Maurice to his feet. Except for those five red points from which the blood had just begun to well, the kid's face was as white as the handkerchief he applied to it. He heard John's voice say, sharply from behind him, "That's no good. What we've got to do is to get him up to the house".

"Why?" Maurice spoke. "I'm all right. It isn't even hurting."

"Shut up, you little fool. Come on. Run."

"But I—I can't."

"Come on, I tell you."

John seized Maurice by the hand. He took three steps with him. Philip saw his younger brother stumble, fall; realised that he had fainted while John still thought he was shamming.

"If those wounds aren't disinfected", said John, "it may mean blood poisoning."

He stooped; gathered Maurice clumsily in his arms. Half-way up to the house, Maurice began to kick. John abjured him, "Quiet, will you". Philip said, "Shall I help? He must be jolly heavy".

"He is", gasped John. "And the little beast's bleeding like a stuck pig. But I can manage all right. You cut along and find mother. She's sure to know what one ought to put on."

§ 3

As she watched Philip dash up the last slope of lawn and across the parapeted bridge that leads into the black and white

back porch of the Manor—Charlotte was only conscious of the thought, "It looks as though there's been an accident".

Yet even so she at once connected the accident with Maurice, and her heart gave one queer flutter as she dropped the daffodils she had been arranging, and moved quickly across the dark oak floor of Long Gallery—where once Oliver Cromwell had sat in judgment on a Carteret—into the hall.

A slant of spring sunshine from one of the narrow stained glass windows showed her the beads of sweat on Philip's face. But he could not help laughing as he gave her the briefest outline of what had just occurred.

"From the fuss John's making", he said, "you might think the silly young ass had been bitten by a cobra."

He told her more of what had happened. Charlotte laughed, too, in her relief to know the accident of so little importance. Running upstairs for the iodine, however, she experienced a moment's perturbation. Maurice—by far the best-looking of her children—might be permanently disfigured. He must be in pain. He would hardly have fainted otherwise. And the chances were that John had been very rough with him.

Quick of John, though—unwontedly quick—to realise the possible danger. Having grabbed the tiny fluted bottle and some cottonwool from her medicine cupboard, she arrived downstairs just in time to hear him say, "You'll do what you're told for once. Help me to get him on to that sofa, Philip".

Charlotte saw, as she ordered Philip to fetch water and a clean towel, as she stooped over Maurice, that there might be danger.

For one of those bites had only just missed the left eye, the lower lid of which was already swelling; and Maurice flinched with pain when, a moment or so later, she began to wipe away the blood.

"That hurts, mumsey", he complained. "Must you?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so, dear."

She turned; ordered Philip to telephone for Doctor Heythrop.

"Shall I hold him?" asked John as she dropped the iodine on the first pad of cottonwool.

"Perhaps that would be better. I mustn't get any of this into his eye."

She realised, at once, that she should not have spoken that last sentence; understood, with a curious flash of intuition, just where Maurice's imagination had taken him.

"You're not going blind if that's what you're worrying about", she heard herself say. "This *is* going to hurt you. But the pain will soon go off."

John leaned across the sofa; held the flaxen head tight between his big hands. She seated herself on Maurice's legs; dabbed swiftly; repeated the dabs.

Maurice screamed—just once. John spoke one word, "Funk!" Maurice said, through clenched teeth, "Blast you. I'm not". She could feel his thin little legs trying to wriggle from under her. His right hand made a movement to his face. She seized the wrist, held it. Gradually the fire of the iodine burnt itself out; and Maurice's set mouth began to relax.

"I'm sorry I swore, mumsey", he said.

She got up.

"Let me go", went on Maurice to John; then, slowly, "You may as well know. I was just going to have a shot at your legs when I saw that weasel."

He managed a smile. John stared down at him for a moment.

"You little devil", he began. But in a second or so he, too, smiled; and, suddenly bursting into a great guffaw of mirth, he continued, "Then all I can say is it serves you jolly well right".

§ 4

"Young Heythrop", as the village still called him, though he had taken over his father's practice in the early nineties, arrived on his bicycle within three quarters of an hour. By then Lollie, summoned from her flower-cutting, had put Maurice to bed:

"I've given him an antitetanus injection, just for safety", announced the doctor, returning to the Gallery, where tea had now been laid—according to custom—on the two

William and Mary tables in the big window-recess, all round which ran a seat covered with faded crimson velvet. "I think we can flatter ourselves there's no danger—though there might have been."

He took the chair Philip drew up for him. Charlotte, passing him his cup, asked, "Will it leave a scar?"

"A little one, perhaps."

"Then I'm glad it didn't happen to me", put in Elizabeth from the groined fireplace.

John said, "No. You certainly can't afford scars". His sister flushed. Nan Pettigrew laughed, "John's trying to be funny. He'll see a joke one day. But if he does, he'll never get over it". Philip, removing his square teeth from a bun, called across the room, "Never mind, Elizabeth. Whatever John thinks about you, there's always the faithful swain in Philadelphia. How many pages did he write by this mail? Is he coming over again this summer? Guess little Dwighty Wighty will soon be crossing the herring pond to see his little Bethy Wethy".

"Ass", said Elizabeth, flushing again. "Scrubby little schoolboy. Who can't get out of Lower Fifth?"

The taunt went home. The senior prefect at Miss Hornibrook's resumed a semblance of dignity. Lollie appeared with the news that Maurice felt sleepy. Doctor Heythrop, over a second cup of tea, said that he would call again in the morning. Simeon, the butler, emerged from the velvet hangings above which hung the "little Rembrandt" to ask whether "Mr. George" would be arriving by the five forty-five or the six-thirty, and was reminded by Charlotte, "I told you this morning that he was coming in his motor car".

The two footmen followed Simeon, and cleared the William and Mary tables of the heavy silver. Presently—Miss Marston escorting the doctor to his bicycle, the two girls departing on their own gossipful occasions, and Philip to the garage—Charlotte found herself alone with her eldest son.

They talked of Maurice for a few moments.

"It must have hurt him like blazes", said John with grudging admiration. "And it was rather sporting to make a clean breast of things. About me, I mean."

"I'm glad to hear you say that. There's a lot of good in Maurice, dear. I wish you and he got on better."

Charlotte hesitated. "It's one of my principal worries", she went on. "After all, you're ever so much older than he is. You ought to be a little more tolerant."

"I know I ought." John scratched his bullet head. "I try to be. But somehow or other he gets on my nerves. And he really is a little devil. He drew a caricature of me the other day. I was supposed to be riding."

"Yes. He showed me that one." Despite herself, Charlotte smiled. "But you'll have to get used to being caricatured if you really mean to go into politics."

"I suppose I shall. By the way, how long is Uncle George staying?"

"Only till tomorrow."

"Do you mind if I"—he, in his turn, hesitated—"tackle him over the port?"

His brown eyes, so like his father's, wrinkled at the corners.

"I'm only the dowager", said Charlotte, brooding, "And I thought he might have changed his mind. He hasn't said anything about wanting to be a barrister for months".

"You see", continued John, still serious, "it'll make an awful lot of difference if Uncle George and Uncle Herbert really approve. They can give me any amount of briefs. I say, mustn't it be fun defending a murderer?"

"I don't imagine your uncles handle many criminal cases."

"I shall have to learn to speak." John, again like his father, continued on his own line. "That's going to be rather a nuisance; because it's one of the things I'm really rotten at."

He rose suddenly; walked to the big window; stood there silent, staring across the smooth lawns, over the clipped yew hedges, towards the distant woods.

"You still think this ought to be enough for a chap", he said next. "Huntin', and shootin', and fishin', and being a magistrate, and looking after the estate and all that sort of thing. I suppose it ought to be. But somehow or other it isn't. I'm different from father. He never seemed to have any ambition."

He fell silent once more. Surprised at his insight, Charlotte asked, "Are you really so ambitious?"

"Rather. Not for myself though." His abrupt shyness was all the boy's. "What I'd like to do is to help people. There's an awful lot of injustice. And it doesn't seem fair for chaps like myself not to—well, do something about it."

Surprised again—somehow she could not see this eldest son of hers as a reformer—Charlotte joined him at the window.

"Do you see what I'm driving at?" he went on.

"Yes, dear."

"And you don't think it awfully silly?"

"No. Of course not."

"I'm glad." With an unwonted gesture of affection he slipped an arm round her waist; holding her to him almost as a lover might have held her. "And I'll try to be more decent with Maurice. If only for your sake."

"That's a bet", he concluded, still boyishly. "And now it's time you had a walk. You've been in the house ever since lunch time. Shall I come with you?"

Her impulse was to kiss him. She restrained it, saying, almost primly, "Yes, dear. If you want to". But once again she caught herself loving him after a new fashion as they strolled out together across the bridge.

§ 5

Beyond the bridge that spans the sunk garden of the Manor, once part of its moat—left and away from where the slope of lawn ends in the home covers—a straight mile of Roman road, grass-covered these many centuries, still leads to what is known as the Old Fort; and, even after all these years, Charlotte never climbs that road without remembering how she and John halted, halfway up it, on that long-ago evening in May.

Yet at the time she was only conscious—as she had been conscious ever since he had put his arm round her in Long Gallery—of a slight embarrassment occasioned by this newest fashion of her love for John.

"If only I could have loved his father like this", she caught

herself thinking. "Demonstratively." Yet the mere fact that she had wanted to demonstrate her love added to the embarrassment; and all she could find to say as she prodded at the turf with her shooting stick was:

"We shan't be able to go much farther. Your Uncle George wouldn't like it if we weren't there to meet him".

And all that John could manage was, "I wonder what sort of car he's bought himself. He always swore nothing would induce him to own one".

For John, also, had grown aware of an embarrassment—though less conscious of its cause. He seemed to be seeing his mother with entirely new eyes. "I never knew she was quite as lovely as this", he caught himself thinking; and secretly he fell to comparing her with the best-looking girls he knew. Especially with Nan.

Only a few hours ago, sitting in the summerhouse with her, he had thought how difficult it would be to find a girl better-looking than Nan. But now, matched against this mother of his, she seemed almost plain.

Nan was too short, too thin, too pale, too insignificant. Plenty of girls had golden hair. But his mother's was her own colour—not quite brown and not quite golden. Her eyes, though almost the same blue, were bigger than Nan's, kinder, ever so much more intelligent. And then, her complexion—so clear, so healthy—the way her lips curled when she smiled.

An impulse to tell her how lovely he thought her proved so overwhelming that he had to turn away; to ram his hands deep in his trouser pockets; to mutter "Jolly fine view of the place, isn't it?"

"The best, I always think", said Charlotte. "Especially on an evening like this."

Silence had them once more. Embarrassment began to pass; but slowly, almost as though it dissolved into this known view of the black and white house, throwing its irregular shadows on flat emerald turf, on the purple and yellow patch of its rock garden.

The shadows were lengthening across that purple and yellow patch. Soon they would touch the red wall where the peach-

blossom had just begun to fall. Home covers were already greening. But on the far hill Charlotte could still see the leafless branches of King's Oak separate against the sky.

"Things are rather late this year", she said.

"We shall be, if we don't get a move on", laughed John.

"I'm not too old to run", she reminded him ; and picked up her skirts.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

§ 1

Ever since he could remember that emotion, John Carteret had been faintly afraid of his Uncle George. With Uncle Herbert, a fellow knew where he stood. With Uncle George, one never did—he was so infernally supercilious, so coldly aloof.

"And so antediluvian", brooded John, shading his eyes—he and his mother were on the other side of the house now, standing in full sunshine—to watch the trail of dust which had just risen beyond King's Oak Hill.

The car came down the white road over the hill. It disappeared between the distant lodge gates. His mother said, "We only just got here in time". He caught himself thinking, "I wonder if she's afraid of him too".

Aloud he said, "Don't let on that I want to have a pow-wow with the old chap".

"Why not?"

"Oh, it might put his back up."

On to the terrace from the double doors behind them, emerged Simeon and his second footman, followed by Philip, swinging a pair of fieldglasses.

"Spotted him from my window", said Philip. "It looked like an Arrol Johnston, but I can't be sure."

"It is an Arrol Johnston", decided Philip a moment or so later, with the car rounding the lake and chugging up the last quarter-mile of gravel. "And that chauffeur jolly nearly missed his gear."

The cabriolet drew up on the terrace. Simeon opened the door. Uncle George took off his cap and goggles. He unbuttoned his heavy coat, fumbled in a breast pocket, found and put on his spectacles before he stepped out.

"An absurd method of locomotion", pronounced Uncle George. "The train is quicker, cleaner, and assuredly cheaper. We punctured three tyres."

He pecked Charlotte with dry lips ; extended a thin hand to John, and nodded a legal face, ten years older than its age, at Philip. Simeon divested him of his dusty coat.

"Item", he continued, "we were caught in a police trap. The fellow claimed that we were doing twenty-seven miles an hour."

They led him into the house ; and Charlotte suggested a glass of Madeira.

"I should prefer a bath", said Uncle George ; and, looking at Philip, "What's amusing you, young man ?"

"Nothing", prevaricated Philip, thinking, "He is a scream. As though everyone hadn't got a motor car nowadays".

John suggested, "Shall I take you up to your room, sir ?"

Uncle George chuckled, "If the baronet does the honours, who am I to say him nay ?"

Charlotte thought, "How right my husband was. He always said George resented his having the title and the Manor"; and realised, with something of a shock, how intermittent her memories of that "other John" were becoming ; how much this one year had done to assuage her grief.

§ 2

The sun was almost down by the time Charlotte reached the bedroom she no longer shared with a husband. At the dressing table, flounced with old cretonne, Kate, her maid, was just kindling the candles.

"Philip's quite right", she decided, as the maid undid her skirt, "I ought to put in one of these new electric-lighting machines."

Shadows crept about the room while Kate was doing her hair. Soon the two lamps had to be lit ; and a knock announced Laura, who stepped round the big four-poster on which the sequinned frock still lay, and said, "Maurice has just woken up. He seems to be in a bit of a state. He says he simply must see you before you go down to dinner".

Laura, already dressed, went out. Hurriedly Charlotte finished her own dressing; and ran across the big first floor landing up the twisting stairway to her youngest's room.

There, too, a lamp had been lit. Maurice was sitting up in his narrow bed.

"You run away, Lollie", he said. "I want to talk to mumsey." Once they were alone, he continued, "I simply had to see you. I want you to tell John something. Otherwise I'll never be able to go to sleep again. He saved my life, didn't he?"

"Aren't you exaggerating?" smiled Charlotte.

Maurice thought that over.

"I always exaggerate", he said at last. "It's so much more fun. But it did serve me jolly well right getting bitten like this. And I won't ever lie in ambush for John again. Will you tell him so? And say I won't make him apple-pie beds any more, or do caricatures of him."

Charlotte thought that over.

"But you could tell him yourself", she suggested finally.

"No, I couldn't." He brooded a moment. "And I don't believe he'd like it nearly as much as if you told him. I say, mumsey"—his dark eyes stared into hers—she was aware, painfully, of his disfigurement—"you won't love John best, will you? When we're both grown up, I mean."

She told him not to be a "sentimental little idiot", and felt relieved when Elizabeth put her head round the door to say, "How is our big-game hunter? Nan and I went to look for the weasel. But we couldn't find it".

"Wouldn't it be fun if a rabbit had eaten it? I shouldn't a bit wonder if that isn't what happened", said Maurice.

"A carnivorous rabbit", smiled Charlotte, "is rather a rarity. Have you had your supper yet?"

"Yes. Gruel. I simply loathed it."

Kissing him good night Charlotte remembered that this temporary disfigurement might leave permanent scars. "Who's being the sentimental idiot now?" she asked herself. "As though it matters if a man has a little mark on his cheek."

Yet somehow it did matter. Somehow she hated the idea of a Maurice any less handsome. Perhaps because John was so plain.

§ 3

John—thought his mother, watching him across the full length of the candle-lit refectory table of the darkly panelled dining-room some quarter of an hour later—really was plain, almost ugly. And whatever else Harrow might have done for him, it had certainly not taught him to take much pride in his clothes.

His dinner jacket might have fitted him a great deal better. His shirt front bulged; and its cuffs were too long. What clumsy hands he had. So unlike Philip's. Always so neat, always such a little dandy, her Philip. A pity he wouldn't work—except at mathematics and geography. She remembered the last time she had remonstrated with him; remembered his scornful, "That's all very well, mater. But what's the good of Homer, or Virgil, except to beaks?"

George, seated on her left, condescended to approve the burgundy.

"I don't expect you've got much of this left", he went on. "John only bought twenty dozen. Now, let me see, when was that? Nineteen hundred and four, I believe. I told him at the time it would take at least another seven years before it would be drinkable."

He turned to Nan Pettigrew, saying, "When you're my age, young lady, you will realise that the pleasures of the table are the least fleeting".

Nan dimpled at him, "O Mr. Carteret, you are funny. You talk as if you were a hundred. But I know exactly how old you are. Because you're just the same age as my father".

Uncle George coughed.

"And how is your dear father?" he asked.

"Much too well. We're afraid he's going to get married again. And she's not so very much older than I am. Only twenty-one."

"You're joking, aren't you, Nan?" broke in Charlotte.

"I only wish I were."

Talk subsided, till George Carteret turned on his niece.

"I understand you're going to Paris", he said.

"Yes, uncle. In the autumn."

"You'll like that."

"I hope so."

"At any rate you will learn to speak the language."

Laura Marston chimed in to say that Elizabeth's French was "very good already". Eyeing her daughter, Charlotte thought, "She doesn't want to go to Paris. The only thing in the world she wants is to marry Dwight Mansfield. And she's only a baby, only just seventeen".

But on that she remembered herself at the same age ; and another dinner at this very table ; and John—the other John—already courting her, heavily, after the fashion of the period ; and musing, "I shall be eighteen next birthday. I'm quite old enough to know my own mind".

"So I oughtn't to think of Elizabeth as a baby any more", she decided. "The only one of them who's still a baby is my Maurice. And he'll be growing up soon. Oh dear, how old I'm getting."

Yet she didn't feel old. Actually she felt much younger since . . .

"Since I've been a widow", she realised ; and, because the realisation was such a shock, it kept her selfcentred until she found herself in the Gallery again, with Nan and Elizabeth and Laura, and Philip, who said as she poured him his coffee :

"John is an ass. He needn't have hacked me on the shins like that. I knew he wanted to be alone with his nibs".

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

§ 1

John had wanted to be alone with "his nibs", as Philip so irreverently called the senior partner in Carteret and Carteret. But once the heavy door closed on his younger brother, all his early fears of Uncle George returned.

He had to take half a glass of the vintage port—of which, also, he was a little afraid—before he could begin, "There's—er—something I rather wanted to talk to you about, sir". And his new cigarette case was half-out of his hip pocket before he remembered the sacredness of the hour.

"Precisely", said Uncle George, observing his next movement. "Precisely. This wine is not—doubtless you will understand the classical allusion—mere rum.

"And what is it that you wish to discuss with me?" continued Uncle George, after a reflective sip. "The question of your allowance when you go up to Cambridge?"

"No, sir." Dash the man. How inhuman he seemed. If only the pater had been alive.

"Something more serious, perhaps?"

"Well, I think it's rather serious. You see, sir, I want to go in for the law."

Uncle George—thought John—might be inhuman. But he was no fool. He grasped one's meaning instantly.

"And your mother does not exactly approve?" he twinkled.

"She doesn't disapprove. Only she seems to think——"

"That it's a little unnecessary."

John nodded. His uncle took another sip of the Jubilee port before he continued, "And of course it is. You will have plenty of money to live on without working".

"Only if I keep the others out of it."

George Carteret's eyes no longer twinkled. They stared at

his nephew from behind the thick lenses of his spectacles. Then his fingers played an imaginary tune on the bare wood of the table for a good half-minute.

"Primogeniture", he began; and stopped, thinking, "Can't imagine his father offering us more than our share. Wonder what Herbert and I'd have done if he had. Told him to go to the devil probably. Wish I'd got on with him better now. Wish I hadn't been so jealous of his having the Manor".

"I think the French law's ever so much better than ours", said John; and again his uncle stared.

"So you've already commenced your studies?" smiled Uncle George; and, because it was the first time he had ever known anything except saturnine humour on those thin clean-shaven lips, John took courage.

"We had it in a lecture on Napoleon", he admitted. "That code he drew up, you know."

"I certainly have a working acquaintance with the Code Napoleon. But do you know the precise meaning of the word, Entail?"

George Carteret, having refilled his glass, plunged into the law of entail. Listening to him, John remembered that moment with his mother, halfway up the hill towards the Fort.

"Of course I'm jolly glad the Manor's mine", he said when the harangue finished. "And I should simply hate not to keep it up properly; especially as mother loves it so. But that won't take all the money? Or will it?"

Uncle George said "That depended. One never knew, with a liberal government in power, what might happen".

"Then why", asked John, "was the pater a liberal?"

"Just because *our* father was a conservative." And that time, Uncle George laughed aloud.

"We're a funny family", he continued. "You'll only find out how funny we are as you grow older. But about this law business? Do you realise how much work you'll have to do?"

"I think so, sir."

"And how long it will take you—I presume you intend honouring the more aristocratic side of our profession—before you can hope to earn any money?"

"About ten years, isn't it?"

"More like thirty." And Uncle George chuckled in the old malicious fashion, as he finished his Cockburn, helped himself to a cigar, rose and indicated John's favourite picture, a Roundhead in heavy armour.

"Do you know who *he* was?" queried Uncle George.

"No. I've often wanted to."

"Neither did your father. I only found out about three weeks ago."

He told the story, of his chance visit to Sotheran's, of discovering the family name in an old book, published just after the Restoration.

"Of course I can't be sure", he concluded. "But one of us certainly fought on the wrong side—and died on it. He was known, apparently, as Contrary Carteret.

"But don't you be *too* contrary", concluded John's elder uncle; and Charlotte, observing them arrive, arm in arm, through the door into Long Gallery, experienced—for the first time in her life—a faint twinge of jealousy.

Which was, of course, too absurd.

§ 2

It had been more than absurd—decided Charlotte, beginning to undress some hour and a half later—to feel jealous just because her brother-in-law and her eldest son seemed to be on friendly terms.

Yet there the feeling was; and John's confidences—imparted only a moment ago—had done little to diminish it.

"He's not half a bad sort when one gets to know him. I shouldn't wonder if we weren't jolly good pals before we've finished. And, by jove, he is clever. It didn't take him more than half a tick to see what I was driving at."

"Jolly good pals." But what right had John to be on those terms with anybody except herself?

Dismissing the thought as unworthy—if anything she should be pleased—John, at his age, needed an elder man's guidance—she unhooked and took off her frock.

On the whole, this day had been one of the happiest in her

widowhood. And not least because Maurice's mishap—it really was only a mishap—so silly to worry because it might leave a tiny scar on his face—looked like terminating the feud between him and John.

"Very sporting of him", John had said, after hearing Maurice's message. "He's not a bad little beggar at heart."

But there Charlotte's reflections about her children came to a sudden end ; because, after all, one had a life apart from one's children—or should have, at thirty-six.

The thought was a new one. It struck her as rather strange—almost as though it were an indecency. Yet she could not help letting her imagination dally with it. And presently the one word, "Freedom", formulated itself in her mind.

"Am I to be only a mother?" thought continued. "For the rest of my life? Till I'm fifty, sixty, seventy?" And from that, still in her petticoats, she fell to considering—very coldly—her exact relations with the other John.

This coldness, also, was new—and seemed even more indecent. All her emotions rebelled against such a consideration. Her intellect, nevertheless, continued to survey—almost as though they were being interpreted for her by a third party—scene after scene from her matrimonial existence.

This very room—sombre and huge in the lamplight—had witnessed the beginning of that existence. Icy sea had witnessed the end of it. What lay between? Mainly a succession of surrenders—the slow wearing-down of her own personality. Mainly a servitude—never unpleasant, yet never thrilling. All so easy. All so much too easy. Not a real freedom. Just a hopping from one cage into another—from her mother's into her husband's.

Queer, that she should never have understood this before. Still more queer that her marriage—while the other John lived—had never seemed a servitude. Why? Maybe because the bars of the other John's cage had been too well gilded. Maybe because he had always been so kind.

Pacing the room, she remembered how kind. Standing a moment by the four-poster, her intellect began to quail ; and her emotions to accuse her of ingratitude. So much, she had taken. So little, she had really given.

A cold woman ?

Perhaps.

One night, he had reproached her.

That last night, on the ship, he had asked her . . . But that night she had come nearer to loving him than ever before . . . So if he had survived . . .

The precise significance of those last thoughts brooked no escape. Yet it had to be faced, both intellectually and emotionally. And after all was it so very important ? Wasn't it—on the whole—almost comforting to know that, if John were alive tonight, she could love him well enough ?

She had loved him well enough. She had made him happy enough. It was the woman's part to offer the cheek ; the man's to kiss. Since she could regret John—since she could wish him back—she must have loved him well enough.

Yet how grand to be free !

§ 3

Waking after a dreamless night, it still seemed rather good to Charlotte that she should be free ; answerable to no man—even to one whom she had respected, who had always been so kind to her—for her comings or her goings.

She sang to herself—as she had not sung for many years now—while she was dressing. And downstairs, first at the breakfast table, with the spring sun shining outside, she still hummed to herself as she flipped through the little pile of envelopes beside her plate.

Till the sight of the stamps, the handwriting on that last envelope, set her lips pursing ; stiffened her fingers on the knife.

"Why ?" she thought, picking up that knife. "He didn't take the trouble to write when John died. He must have heard about it, even in East Africa."

Then she slit the flap, took out the thick paper—so like him, not to use thin foreign paper—and began to read.

"Has anything annoyed you, mater ?" asked John, coming to the table a few moments later.

"What on earth makes you think that ?"

"I don't know. You just look rather cross."

"I assure you I don't feel a bit cross."

For what could it matter, to her, that the woman for whose sake Rupert had exiled himself in East Africa should have "passed away, poor dear"; or that he should be returning to England?

All that was over.

Years ago.

He should have known better than to remind her of it—even indirectly.

And to suggest she might like to see him again.

The cheek of the man.

The sheer brazen nerve!

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

§ 1

CAPTAIN RUPERT WHITTINGHAME, who had been made a member of the Distinguished Service Order for swimming the Tugela under Boer fire more than twelve years previously, smiled at the reflection of his own face in the shaving mirror; anointed his cheeks with witch hazel, and applied the thin curling irons to his heavy blond moustache.

"Close on forty next year", he thought. "But you don't look it, and you don't feel it. So why worry."

Smiling again he lit himself a fat Turkish cigarette.

It was so good to know that one could once more afford "Sullivans"; so good to be back in these old Jermyn Street rooms, with the smell of washed pavements wafted in through the open windows and London busy below.

Devilish good—after more than four years in British East.

Tall in his flowered-silk dressing gown, sheer enjoyment puckering the clear skin at the corners of his dark eyes, Rupert Whittinghame walked to the window and looked down into the street.

The hosier's shop opposite had been open for half an hour. Out of it lounged two men—one in a black topper and one in gray.

"May as well patronise the match myself", he mused. "Pity I can't use the pavilion any more. But what's the use of crying over spilt milk?"

He passed into the sitting room—all horsehair upholstery and sporting prints; and rang for his breakfast, wondering whether the committee would readmit him to membership of the M.C.C. if he sent in his application. They jolly well ought to. After all, he'd paid off his bankruptcy. Though not in full. Because to pay twenty shillings in the pound had seemed just

a bit too much of a good thing, considering that his principal creditors were moneylenders.

Besides, a fellow couldn't be expected to leave himself on the rocks.

Eggs and bacon interrupted the ethical argument.

"As fine a day as one could wish for, sir", said the obsequious Parker. "You'll be going to Lord's, of course."

"Rather. Be a good chap, and look me out my togs."

Parker retired to the bedroom. Ethics were abandoned. How much better a chap's coffee tasted when he hadn't grown it himself.

Rupert Whittinghame polished off his eggs and bacon, the contents of the toast rack, all the butter and most of the marmalade. "Thick nights", he mused, lighting another Sullivan, "never did upset me."

The preceding night had been thick—yet not altogether satisfactory. Champagne was all very well. That new club—what was the name of the place?—the Lotus—had been all very well. Ladies of the chorus were all very well.

But, damn it all, a chap rising forty needed to be in love.

"Can't get over Millie", he brooded. "Miss her like hell. Sentimental bloke. Always have been and always shall be. Ruddy shame we could never get married. That husband of hers is a swine if ever there was one. Good mind to hunt him up and give him a horsewhipping."

His imagination began to play with the idea. He saw himself in the role of avenger; paying Millie's husband back for all they both owed him—for the scandal of her unsuccessful divorce action, for their years of exile, for her eventual death.

"Murderer", decided Rupert. "Ought to have shot him when he refused to bring a cross-petition. Ought to be able to call him out and run him through the gizzard."

There, however, his sense of humour intervened; and, as he dropped the end of his cigarette into the dregs of his coffee, a queer hardness, a curious recognition of values which underlay both the romantic and the sentimental side of his nature, bade him remember his precise feelings on the day of Millie's death.

The recollection proved faintly unpleasant. Too much

relief had been mixed with the sorrow. And the almost-coincidental news of that other death, his mother's, had also produced a mixture of feeling.

One of the very best—his mother. All the same—fifteen thousand quid. Millie, too, had been an absolute trump. All the same—freedom.

After all he'd done the right thing by Millie, where some chaps wouldn't have.

"Lots of chaps", decided Rupert; and so went to dress.

§ 2

The braided morning coat, the lavender waistcoat, and the shepherd's plaid trousers on the hangers behind Rupert's bedroom door still smelt of moth balls. He remembered the last time he had worn them—for Signorinetta's Derby; and telling this very man Parker, "I'm going to leave a couple of trunks with you. Don't expect I shall be away very long".

Nineteen-eight, Signorinetta's Derby. And here one was in nineteen-thirteen, with a suffragette getting herself killed at Tattenham Corner. What would the silly fools be up to next?

Whistling the tune of a song he had heard the night before—the only two words he could recollect were "Hitchy Koo"—Rupert began to dress. The crease in his trousers, examined with care, proved satisfactory. Parker had chosen the right boots, taken the trees out of them, cleaned the pearl buttons and the cloth uppers, polished the patent leather.

The silly fellow, though, had put him out the wrong tie.

Search, however, failed to produce the correct tie; and some quarter of an hour later Rupert Whittinghame, also, strolled into the hosier's shop opposite, where he left his "four-in-hand"; and, having inserted his pearl pin into a cascade of dark blue silk, proceeded past John Mark's wine and cigar shop into St. James' Street.

There, his hatter, who had also proved at his bankruptcy, welcomed him with subdued effusion; but supplied a gray topper, agreeing, "It certainly suits you better than a black one, Captain Whittinghame. Yes. They are very fashionable this season"; and controlled his surprise when Rupert,

producing a crisp five-pound note from a leather case with gold corners, continued, "I expect you'd like me to pay cash".

"Turned over a new leaf?" mused Rupert's hatter as the gallant captain strolled off, malacca over arm, into the sunshine. "Well—it's about time."

Meanwhile the gallant captain was passing another of his clubs; and had almost gone in.

The involuntary action—checked only as his foot touched the first step—again stirred Rupert's sense of humour. He tried to imagine his reception by the hall porter; wondered if he could make a sketch of it.

"Dash it", he thought, "I haven't touched a pencil since Millie died"; and, so thinking, he looked straight into a face he could have sworn he recognised—until the mere fact that he had been out of England for the best part of five years seemed to prove any recognition impossible.

"Chap's hardly grown up yet", he decided. "Probably still at Harrow."

Yet, strolling on again, the features of that young face haunted him. That nose, that mouth, were so extraordinarily familiar. He could even remember where he had seen them. In some church. At some wedding.

Dash it all, though, it was years since he had been inside a church. So the thing must be hallucination. Here in London one was always seeing faces one thought one recognised. And if one wanted to see anything of the cricket, one had better be getting up to Lord's.

A taxi—there seemed nothing else about nowadays—cruised by. He hailed it; told the man to open it; stood to light yet another Sullivan; and climbed in.

Bond Street, the London sunshine, the fit of his clothes, the taste of the good tobacco—all these made a fellow want to sing for the sheer zest of being home again.

"Stay home this time", he decided. Just as he came to that decision a big saloon car with a Harrow favour on its radiator cap drew level, giving him another glimpse of that young face which had seemed so familiar.

"And no wonder", thought Rupert, his new hat still off his

head and the smile still on his lips as the big car shot by his taxi.

For the elder woman in the back seat of that saloon was Charlotte, and the girl must be her daughter, and the young face that of her eldest son.

§ 3

"Lovelier than ever", meditated Rupert, restoring his hat to his flaxen head. "Pity the girl hasn't taken after her. Pretty cold bow she gave me. Never answered my letter either. Don't see why *she* should bear any malice. After all, if it hadn't been for her chucking me I might have been quite a respectable member of society."

And he relapsed into a mood of romantic sentimentalism—slightly leavened by his sense of humour—which lasted all the way to Lord's.

There—having forgotten to purchase it in the West End—he bought a cornflower buttonhole from a hawker; and joined the queue at one of the turnstiles. Play had begun. He heard a rattle of handclaps as he paid his money. But his thoughts were not with the game.

"Keep off the grass—or butt in?" he mused as he strolled the asphalt. "Better keep off it. Only get snubbed if I don't."

For, of course, Charlotte had a perfect right to snub him. He wasn't a respectable member of society. He'd blotted his copybook when he ran away with Millie. And not for the first time either—though "old Tubby" had allowed him to send in his papers and he was still on the reserve.

He caught sight of "old Tubby", now a brigadier—and avoided him, thinking, "Got my commission on the field. Might have commanded the regiment myself. Damn fool to back 'em for more than I could afford. Paid up in the end though. No need to hack a fellow out just because he couldn't settle on the Monday".

And why had he backed 'em so high? Why had he got into trouble with those moneylenders? Why was he always in trouble?

"The ladies", decided Rupert. "Always falling in love. Can't help it. Built that way."

But now, with a snug little fortune in the bank, *and* that income from his trustees which even the moneylenders hadn't succeeded in touching, he really was going to turn over a new leaf. If he had to fall in love, it wouldn't be with a Gaiety girl, or someone else's wife.

§ 4

Full of these good resolutions, feeling himself already the reformed character, Rupert allowed his imagination to sweep forward. The thing for a chap like himself was marriage. The girl would have to have a bit of money, of course. And she mustn't be too bad-looking. Otherwise he'd be apt to wander.

Still, there were plenty of such girls about.

He found himself eyeing some of them, growing speculative about one of them, thinking that she looked a little like Millie must have looked at that age. Poor Millie. Life had given her a pretty dirty deal. It might have given her a worse one, though. She might have fallen in love with a real rotter, with some chap who wouldn't have stood by her.

"But nobody can say that about me", mused Rupert. "I stuck to her till the end."

Preening himself thus, he became all the romantic. Again his thoughts turned to Charlotte. His first love!

Did a chap ever really forget his first love? Wouldn't his life have been altogether different if Charlotte hadn't thrown him over? And why should she snub him—dash it all, she had no right to—if he reclaimed acquaintanceship.

They were relations, too.

He was at the back of the pavilion by the time he remembered that. A man he had not seen for years detained him; insisted on knowing, "What you've been up to since we last met", and that they must, "Forgather for a meal one of these days".

The incident—the implication that he could not be the pariah he had been imagining himself during the week since he landed in England—was altogether pleasing. He decided, there and then, not to keep off the grass any longer.

Five minutes later—and he was escalating the coach.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

§ 1

It would just have been possible—Charlotte realised—to keep Rupert off the coach. But somehow his opening words, the mere touch of his upstretched hand—bare against her glove—had made her forget that momentary annoyance, that momentary fear, experienced as her car passed his taxi in Bond Street.

Besides, he was as handsome—and as tactful—as ever. Elizabeth, usually difficult with strangers, seemed to lose all her shyness before she had exchanged three sentences with him. He took Laura Marston's hand as though she were a duchess. John and Philip, he treated without any of that condescension which can be so insufferable in an elder; herself with a touch of deference, almost of humility, very flattering to the self-esteem.

"Poor man", she caught herself thinking, "I really ought to have answered his letter"; and pulled up sentimentality with a round turn.

There was no need to pity Rupert. The grief of his bereavement had gone over. It struck her as a little strange that she should know this. But then she had always known Rupert better than he knew himself.

"He'll never grow up", she mused; and, looking across the green to where one of the Harrow bowlers was just starting his run, her mind went back twenty years to the day when he too had bowled against Eton—and taken five wickets for thirty-two in the second innings.

Queer, that she who took so little interest in the game nowadays should remember that score.

The ball left the bowler's hand. The batsman jumped out at it. She heard willow strike leather; lifted her eyes to the sun; dropped them to watch the white figure sprint across

the grass towards them, turn, jump back three paces, stand steady by the boundary.

"Well caught, sir", shouted Rupert, half a second later. "Jolly well caught, by jingo."

And again it came to Charlotte that he would never grow up.

That batsman made his way to the pavilion. Another figure came to the wicket. Something made her say, "Don't you wish you were playing?"

"Don't I just", laughed Rupert; and, "If I'd have had my rights, I'd have played for Cambridge."

Philip chipped in, "John's going to Cambridge next term". Elizabeth said, "And I'm going to Paris". But John took no part in the conversation that followed. He seemed to have no interest outside the cricket. Yet only an hour ago he had been scoffing, "If it weren't for the example and all that sort of thing, I'd spend the day in the law courts. Uncle George has got a jolly interesting case on, and I know he'd take me".

Charlotte had the impression that John might have conceived one of his peculiar antipathies to Rupert. But that, on second thoughts, seemed absurd.

Presently Nan Pettigrew, her father, and Gladys Hardcastle, now officially his fiancée, returned from strolling. Introductions over, Rupert said, "Well, I'll be off".

"Why?" asked Nan. "There's plenty of room."

Smiling, she edged nearer to John. Rupert looked from her to Charlotte. Charlotte said, "It's Colonel Pettigrew's coach". Nan said, "Do stay. We can give you lunch if you like". Her father seconded the invitation.

"That sounds very delightful", smiled Rupert, and sat down next to Nan, thinking, "Just my cup of tea if only she were a bit older". Not that this immature girl with the pale hair and the thin lips could hold a candle to Charlotte. Not that any girl could, if it came to that.

Charlotte's beauty—when Rupert, only a quarter of his mind on his conversation with Nan, came to consider it—really was remarkable. The present fashion, that picture hat, the flowing dress—so different from the stiff straws, the

waisted frocks the women had been wearing when he left London—suited her to a T.

"Eighteenth-century type", mused Rupert. "Gainsborough. Beautiful Miss Gunnings." And, mentally, he fell to sketching that perfect line from cheekbone to ear, the curl of hair at the forehead, the lovely cut of those lips.

Then Charlotte turned to make some casual remark; and, as his imaginary pencil executed a full face to pair with the profile, it seemed impossible that she should be the mother of these three adolescents.

And, by the way, wasn't there a fourth?

"Another boy", she admitted in answer to his question. "But he's still at Hendersons."

"In the eleven, too", put in Philip, over Rupert's shoulder. "Though he is such a kid. So we ought to have a flannel in the family before we've finished."

Colonel Pettigrew, wrinkling a not-over-intelligent forehead, interposed, "You were in the eleven, weren't you, Whittinghame? Eighteen ninety-three, I seem to remember".

"That's right", said Rupert.

"And weren't you in the D.G.'s at one time?"

"Yes. They gave me a regular commission in South Africa. But I only stayed on for my seven years."

The colonel's attention returned to the raw-boned, red-headed young woman he was about to marry. John asked Nan to take a walk with him. Nan said, "I've only just come back from one. And it'll be the lunch interval in a few minutes".

"Why didn't you stay on in the cavalry?" she asked Rupert.

Charlotte could actually feel the hesitancy which preceded that, "Well, to be quite frank with you, Miss Pettigrew, I had a slight difference of opinion with my commanding officer".

And again she experienced something of pity; again she had to wrench back sentimentality with a strong hand.

"His own fault", she said to herself. "Everything that's ever happened to Rupert has been his own fault."

Yet was that completely true?

§ 2

The luncheon interval showed Rupert at his best. The Pettigrew butler could have had no better footman. It was always Rupert who uncorked another bottle of champagne, who served more *foie gras*, or who passed up a second portion of the strawberries and cream.

And all these little offices, he did so deftly, as though it really pleased him to do them, unlike John.

John—thought Charlotte, secretly comparing him with Rupert—would always be a little clumsy, a little ungracious. No woman would ever care for John in the same way women had cared for Rupert. Neither John nor Philip would ever be . . . fascinating.

For Rupert was fascinating. One simply couldn't get over that.

The thought irritated her, but she found it impossible to avoid. Presently, with lunch finished and cricket started again, her imagination began to ask questions. Rupert had admitted, during the course of Nan's interrogatories, that he intended to remain in England. Should he be invited to dine at Montpelier Square? Should he be asked to stay at the Manor? If so, when? If not, how was she to signify her disapproval of him?

But did she disapprove of him? After all, she was a modern woman. She could not abide the Victorian prejudices. People must have more than one chance. She must not put Rupert outside the pale because of a few escapades.

And Rupert's last escapade was not entirely to his discredit. There had been a certain glamour about it, a touch—more than a touch—of chivalry.

"Poor man", she thought once more; and from that she fell to remembering the horseman he had always been, and to wondering whether he had any money, whether he would be able to hunt again when the season came round.

It would be rather nice—if he couldn't afford it—to give Rupert a day or two with hounds.

Surprised at the turn her imagination had taken, she concentrated on the cricket. But during the tea interval, when

Rupert said, "How about us two taking a little promenade, Charlotte?" she had no impulse to refuse.

He handed her down from the coach, and they stepped across the ropes.

"Long time since you and I did this", he smiled. "Nice kids you've got. D'you know, John's so like his father that I as good as recognised him in St. James' Street this morning?"

"There is a great likeness", she admitted. "And not only in looks.

"John wants to be a barrister", she went on. "Philip threatens to go into business. He broke it to me this morning."

"Really? And the girl?"

"A trifle romantic."

Charlotte, in her turn, smiled; but her lips stiffened at Rupert's, "Hardly to be wondered at".

"Sorry", he went on. "I didn't mean to tread on any corns."

Suddenly selfconscious, Charlotte avoided his eyes. A woman she knew stopped them. She meditated introducing Rupert, but refrained, thinking, "I don't want to *afficher* myself with him".

"And who does the youngest take after?" he asked, as they strolled on again.

The question seemed difficult.

"Maurice is a little bit of a handful", she confessed after a pause. "But I expect he'll grow out of it. All the Carterets are so steady."

"Meaning that there are no black sheep on that side of the family?"

His impudence amused her.

"So that's the latest pose", she suggested.

"On the contrary." He fingered his moustache. "Not only are we a reformed character, but a perfectly solvent citizen. In fact, if you know of a really nice girl, not entirely penniless, who could do with a steady-going middle-aged husband, all wild oats sown and harvested, you've only got to introduce me."

"Pressing the button", laughed Charlotte, "and leaving you to do the rest."

She had not intended to laugh, nor to be carried away by

Rupert's inconsequence. He might pretend to reformation. He might even be—temporarily—solvent. But, at his age, nothing would alter Rupert's character. He was a rolling stone, a ne'er-do-well. Always making love to some woman or other.

"Why the sudden frown?" he interrupted.

"Because you're so completely incorrigible."

He thought that over. Then he said, "I seem to have heard those words before. From one, Gertrude Henderson. By the way, how is our Gertrude? Still teaching the sons of gentlemen to behave as such, I hope".

"Mother", began Charlotte stiffly, "is quite well, thank you".

But again, willy nilly, she laughed; and was once more laughing when, a moment or so later, they encountered John, Nan, Laura—and Philip, who gravitated to Rupert, ejaculating, "I've just been talking to old Wetshirt. He says he remembers you quite well. You were up to him for tiques. But you were never any good at them. He says that you were a marvellous bowler though—and that you did the hat trick against Marlborough".

Nan, too—Charlotte observed—gravitated to Rupert, when the first bell rang and they began to make their way back to the coach.

"I wish you were coming to the dance tonight", she heard Nan say, as she took her own seat between the colonel and his Gladys. And it was with the most peculiar sensation of pleasure that she caught Rupert's answer:

"There's nothing I'd like better, Miss Pettigrew; but unfortunately I've fixed up to dine and do this new show at Daly's—*The Marriage Market*, isn't it?—with an old pal of mine".

§ 3

Captain Rupert Whittinghame's "old pal"—who had been thinking about him, to the exclusion of all her other young men, ever since their previous night's meeting at the Lotus—began to regret, about halfway through supper, that she had sent for a hairdresser to curl her luxuriant golden tresses. This extravagance—experience seemed to tell her—would not be justified by final results.

"You're quite different from what you were last evening",

she said archly. "I thought you and me were going to be really good friends."

"So did I", answered, to Cora's complete amazement, the handsomest man she had ever met. "So did I, little woman." And he ruminated for a while, before he confided, "But don't imagine it's your fault. It's mine. You see, I happened to run in to someone I used to know rather well this afternoon. And it's knocked me off my perch a bit".

He continued to ruminate over his Möet. Presently he caught her hand under the table.

"You're the sort", he began, "that a chap can tell things to."

The story Rupert told over that champagne supper was as apocryphal as the name by which Cora knew him. Once launched, nevertheless, it became as credible to the teller as it seemed true to the listener.

And Rupert's good-night kiss at the door of the flat, his, "I wish it could have been different, my dear. But what's a chap to do? There's never been another girl in my life, and there never can be", so nearly convinced him of his own virtue that his taxi had taken him the best part of a quarter of a mile in the direction of Jermyn Street before he began to reproach himself for having been "a bit of a mug".

"Might just as well have had my fun while I was about it", mused Rupert, paying off his driver. "Could easily have told the kid I'd had a telegram recalling me from leave. 'Just this once.' And all that sort of thing. Bet I could have brought it off too."

Some slight conviction of virtue, nevertheless, remained and, over a final whiskey and soda, the flimsy substratum of truth on which he had reared his romantic edifice ("Can't tell you her name, of course, little woman. Wouldn't be cricket. But I've loved her all my life. Fact. Ever since I was at the Varsity. Only she married somebody else, don't you know") turned to reinforced concrete in a mind which had always made a speciality of selfdelusion.

§ 4

Morning brought a touch of humour, a faint mood of cynicism. Midday, nevertheless, found Rupert again on his way to Lord's.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

§ 1

NOTHING could have been more natural—it seemed to Charlotte—than Rupert's appearance, Rupert's greeting, on the second day of the match. But both that day, and during the weeks which followed, she had little leisure to consider Rupert, being too preoccupied with the reappearance of Dwight.

This year—according to Aurelia's last letter—there should have been no visitation by Dwight Mansfield. The boy—he was only a boy, not twenty-one yet—had started on a world tour with his father.

"But the old man's stopping over in Berlin and Paris for the next fortnight", the young American explained to Charlotte on the telephone. "So I just got him to let me off the string."

Philip's remark, when his mother returned to the Montpelier Square breakfast table with this news, flushed Elizabeth's unpowdered cheeks a bright scarlet. Even John could not refrain from a heavy, "Does this mean a wedding in the family?" And Laura, too, broached that possibility—in a ladylike whisper—while she and Charlotte dealt with the morning's correspondence before they left for Lord's.

"It's been going on for more than a year now", fluttered Laura. "I'm certain he means to propose to her."

"Nonsense", said Charlotte sharply. "They're neither of them out of the nursery."

But from the moment that Dwight, dressed even more Englishly than the English, clambered onto the coach and shook her by the hand, saying, "Lady Carteret, it's just fine to see you again", she felt that Laura was right.

This last year had changed Dwight from the stripling into the man. All through that day, moreover, she was

aware of the most peculiar change in Elizabeth; who had not only grown up (within the hour, as it seemed) but grown beautiful, at any rate about the lips and the eyes.

Charlotte tried to tell herself that this was the purest illusion; that these were the same lips which had so often kissed her, and the same brown, not over-intelligent, not sufficiently animated eyes. She also tried to tell herself, "Don't be like Laura. Don't be a sentimentalist. At Elizabeth's age, at Dwight's age, young people don't know their own feelings".

These efforts, however, proved as vain as Sunday afternoon's effort to take refuge in laughter when Ellen appeared at the drawing-room door with the announcement, "Mr. Mansfield has called, m'lady. I informed him that Sir John and Mr. Philip and Miss Elizabeth were out. But he says it was you he called to see, and may he come up".

Charlotte did manage one little laugh, thinking, "So this is what the two of them were arranging while they strolled round the square last night; this is why Elizabeth insisted on John and Philip taking her to the Zoo". But not even her eyes betrayed her as she listened to Dwight's opening, "I'm so very glad to find you alone, Lady Carteret, because I've got something rather serious to tell you".

Since he and Elizabeth took this thing seriously, so must she.

"About my daughter?" she suggested, perceiving that his first words had left him considerably tongue-tied.

"Why, yes." He took the chair she had indicated; and his keen, clean, slightly sharp-featured face went rather white, before he went on, "She hasn't said anything to you this time, has she? Of course I know she did say something when you got back from the States because she told me so—last year, when I asked her if she'd wait for me".

Silence had him again. Her mind went back to his last visit—three months after her husband's death.

"Elizabeth only mentioned it that once", she said. "But of course I know you've been corresponding regularly."

Dwight said, boyishly, "I've never been able to think of anybody else. Not since we first met. And I guess it's the same way with her. But of course we're awfully young. We

realise we can't get married yet awhile. Not till I'm through college anyway. And you're quite right about her going to Paris. Only we're too much in love with each other to keep it to ourselves any more. So we want to be engaged. Would you mind that terribly? I—I felt I had to ask you before I said anything to father".

"Such babies", thought Charlotte.

But what could one do, except give a qualified consent?

§ 2

Charlotte's had been a triply qualified consent. No official engagement could be permitted. Dwight's father must be informed immediately. The wedding was not to take place for "at least a year".

Elizabeth's unofficial fiancé, nevertheless, might spend the rest of his fortnight at the Manor. And, for the lovers, that sufficed.

Ten whole days—Laura and Charlotte only chaperoning them at mealtimes—they had to themselves. Then the schools broke up, sending John, Philip and Maurice home. And within another forty-eight hours Dwight had gone back to the Continent, leaving Elizabeth alone.

"The child"—it seemed to her mother—bore the separation well, neither moping nor mooning. But confidences, she would not give—and intuition told Charlotte not to ask for them. She could not but remember how delicate a flower her own childish love for Rupert had been.

Yet that Elizabeth's flower would not wither so easily, she also knew.

There was a poise, a certainty, a balance about this "new Elizabeth", which both surprised one, and made one afraid. She spoke of, "Next year, when I marry Dwight", as though there were no power which could prevent her from marrying the boy, no slenderest chance that either his feelings or her own could change.

So supposing—just supposing—that the boy's feelings did change. What then?

This supposition worried Charlotte throughout the summer holidays. Suddenly Elizabeth had become her main problem.

And one day, towards the end of August, she decided against sending her to Paris.

Elizabeth, told of this decision, became slightly emotional. It sounded too wonderful—said she—to be true.

"But if you've been hating the idea as much as all that", suggested Charlotte, "why on earth didn't you tell me?"

"Because I'm so bad at telling things", confessed Elizabeth. "Except, of course, to Dwight. But then we tell each other everything."

And this—thought Charlotte—was one's only daughter, flesh of one's own flesh.

About this time, too, she became aware—subconsciously rather than consciously—that even John kept secrets from her, that he could talk more openly with Philip, and even with George, who spent a week of what he called "his long vacation" at the Manor.

Only with Maurice—it seemed to her—was she on firm mother-ground.

In the September, Maurice accompanied Philip to Harrow, and John went up to Cambridge. Keeping Elizabeth at home, she had decided to keep Laura also. But the house, with only the three of them in it, seemed far too big.

It had been different when her husband was alive. It would be different when holidays came round again. For the moment, however—and it was no good pretending otherwise—she felt more lonely than she had ever felt in her life.

Selfpity being contrary to her nature, she sought remedies against loneliness. John and Philip, with some of their friends, had accounted for most of the partridges; but Murdoch still reared a few pheasants. She gave a small house-party for the first three days of October. That helped a little. So did cub hunting. So did her work for the church, for the school, for the Liberal Association, for a rather lukewarm branch of "the movement", whose members paraded the local towns carrying banners, "Law-abiding Woman Suffragists Demand the Vote".

Nevertheless, life continued to be curiously empty, curiously dissatisfying.

Why?

§ 3

Charlotte Carteret, much as she liked to think of herself as "modern", could never quite face up to that "Why?" She ought—she kept telling herself—to be perfectly contented. She had a certain position. She had more than enough money. She had four children, superb health, plenty of hard exercise, quite a lot of routine work to do, and a sufficiency of acquaintances.

All the same, barring accidents, she had another good half of mundane existence ahead of her—and not one real friend.

This last thought clarified itself, depressingly, at the reception which followed Colonel Pettigrew's marriage to Gladys Hardcastle; and the first meet of the season did little to dissipate gloom. Only with hounds away for the vale and the big fences still blind enough to need all one's knowledge of the country and all one's horsemanship, did she experience exhilaration, did she manage to forget that other thought, which had been present all the while they were drawing, "There must be at least two hundred out today. Everybody for miles round. And how much would it matter to me if they all broke their necks?"

That day, they lost their last fox a good fifteen miles from the Manor. Charlotte hacked home as usual; but the afternoon's hunt had been a long one, and it was nearly seven before she dismounted from her second horse at the foot of King's Oak Hill.

"If you'd been out", she told Elizabeth, whom she found waiting for her in the car just before she reached the lodge gates, "you'd have known that nothing had happened to me."

"The child" said, with the first indication of temper she had ever shown, "I told you I'd promised Dwight not to hunt, so why nag me about it? And I wasn't as anxious about you as all that. One reason why I came to meet you was this telegram. It's from Captain Whittingham. He's staying with some people in Laxford and wants to know if he can come over for lunch tomorrow".

"If you tell me what to say", continued Elizabeth, while her mother read Rupert's wire by the light of the acetylenes,

"Travers can just get me to the village before the post office shuts."

Charlotte hesitated ; then she said, "Wire him it will be all right".

The car moved off. The tired horse nuzzled at her shoulder as though to say, "It's about time I was watered and fed".

But it took a good two minutes before John Carteret's widow walked him on again, thinking, "Stupid of me".

Again, however, why ?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

§ 1

THERE was no reason why Rupert shouldn't invite himself to lunch—and no earthly reason why she should refuse to receive him. All the same, Charlotte spent the rest of that evening in alternate annoyance and regret.

She had invited the new vicar—a bachelor—to dinner. Afterwards, he partnered her against Laura and Elizabeth at bridge. "Let's hope the man's sermons are better than his auction", she thought, as he pedalled away on his bicycle and Simeon shot the bolts of the front door.

Elizabeth kissed her and went off to bed. Laura stayed on in the library to sip her hot water. For the fiftieth time, they discussed the installation of electric light.

Presently Laura said she felt sleepy—and that Charlotte, too, must be tired. But after Laura, also, had gone, the mistress of the Manor sat for a full half-hour, the book across her knees forgotten, the morning's run and the afternoon's forgotten, everything forgotten except . . . that one incident in her life which she most hated to remember, and her first real fear.

She fell asleep with that fear still haunting her inner consciousness. Morning, however, made it seem ridiculous; and, breakfasting, a sunshine almost spring-like gladdened her eyes.

By Elizabeth's plate—habitually, she came down ten minutes after the gong—lay the usual bi-weekly letter from Dwight. When she did come down, Charlotte had the impulse to chaff her about the regularity of the correspondence.

"Such a pity", she thought, restraining herself, "that the child hasn't got my sense of humour." But then, so few of the Carterets had ever possessed that saving grace.

One could tell that by a mere glance at these pictures, these heavy countenances staring down at one from their heavy gold frames. That Cavalier Carteret, for instance, was as far removed from his more famous laughing counterpart as the Roundhead cousin whose history had been unearthed by George. While as for the rest—they were just worthy replicas of the man she had married, differing only in their dress.

"Too worthy", Charlotte caught herself thinking. "Like my son, John."

This criticism of John made her feel a little disloyal. How lucky she was, really, to have such an eldest son—one who had never given, and never would give her a single day's anxiety.

A pity, though, that John hadn't a little more fire.

The morning's routine dispelled further thought. She had her usual discussions with her cook, Mrs. Pettifer, about food ; with Murdoch about vermin ; with Stephenson—her head gardener—about the expense of heating the greenhouses. At the stables, Leacock—already a little past his work as stud groom—complained of the hay. Travers demanded two new tyres ; and suggested they should buy their petrol at Laxford instead of in the village.

This last—explained Charlotte to a Londoner as yet unversed in the ways of feudalism—could not be done.

It was nearly eleven by then—too late for her customary walk into the village. She told Travers to get the car out ; did some desultory shopping ; looked in on that law-abiding suffragist, Mrs. Marradine, to confirm her promise that the next meeting might be held at the Manor—and found Laura arranging chrysanthemums in the Long Gallery on her return.

"Elizabeth's gone for a little walk", said Laura. "She didn't finish writing her letter till past eleven. Are you going to change for luncheon?"

"Of course I'm not."

Upstairs in her bedroom, however, Charlotte spent just a little more time than usual in "getting herself tidy"; and had just decided that she might at least change her shoes and stockings when she heard the noise of Rupert's car.

§ 2

Rupert, stopping his two-seater for Elizabeth halfway between the lodge gates and the terrace, had admitted that the thing was "hardly a car".

"Bought it second hand", he laughed. "Calls itself a G.W.K., whatever that may mean. I don't pretend to understand anything about 'em. She shys a bit at her corners, unless it's my driving."

But, as he opened the door for Elizabeth, and she rested a bare hand on the hood sticks to help herself in, he said, with quite a different note in his voice, "I say, you aren't half rushing your fences, young woman—unless you've got it on the wrong finger"; and the girl blushed—making her, it seemed to him, positively attractive—while she twisted off the little diamond ring.

"I'm not really allowed to wear it", she confessed, still blushing. "You see, we're not officially engaged yet."

"We including the handsome young fellow from Philadelphia who turned up for Eton and Harrow?"

"But how on earth do you know that, Captain Whittinghame?"

"Rupert, to you. And I only guessed it. I'm rather good at that kind of deduction."

"I—I thought mother might have told you", said Elizabeth, and returned the ring to her bag.

Rupert's engine had stopped when he put on his brake. He swung a long knickerbockered leg over his driving door; bent to unearth his starting handle, wedged between a belabelled gladstone and a battered guncase, and cranked up.

"So your mother knows all about it", he went on, forcing in a noisy gear.

"Of course. I shouldn't have let myself get engaged without her permission."

"It has been done, I believe."

"Is that meant to be sarcastic?"

The car started with a jerk.

"Are you trying to tick me off?" asked Rupert.

The expression was new to Elizabeth. Everything about

this man was new. She wondered if she were liking him ; and remembered that John had called him "a bounder".

"If you don't mind", she said primly, "I'd rather not talk about my engagement. And please don't mention it when we get to the house, because, you see, it really isn't official yet."

"Then rely on my extreme discretion", grinned Rupert ; and, as they rounded the lake and he had his first sight of the house, he continued "I say, what a gem of a place. Half Tudor and half William and Mary, isn't it ? I used to be jolly keen on architecture. Meant to take it up once. Meant to be an artist after that. Still sketch a bit in my spare time".

"I'm simply hopeless with a pencil", began Elizabeth, and was still telling him how the drawing master at Miss Hornbrook's had refused to continue teaching her, when he missed his gear and stopped his engine again up the final quarter mile of gravel.

"I am an ass", he said as he jumped out again.

She found herself liking him better, because he took the contretemps so nonchalantly ; and remembered Philip's, "Well, I don't agree with you, John. I think he's a jolly fine chap".

§ 3

The sun was still shining when Simeon announced lunch. Taking her seat at the head of the table, Charlotte wondered if this unexpected return of Indian summer could have anything to do with her mood.

She felt curiously gay, curiously inconsequent. All of a sudden, the depression of these last weeks seemed to have lifted. Again and again she caught herself laughing at Rupert's jokes, which were mostly against himself.

Yet, simultaneously, she knew that she was a little afraid of Rupert, and more particularly of the effect he seemed to be having on Elizabeth—she, too, gayer, more inconsequent than usual, almost as though she had forgotten Dwight.

Willy nilly, remembering Rupert's jocular confidences at Lord's, her imagination conceived him going out of his way to fascinate Elizabeth to make her fall in love with him.

to be married." Surely, though, even Rupert . . . And there, for the first time that day, her recollection brought back the picture of him, in his smasher hat and his khaki uniform, as they stood together on the doorstep at Montpelier Square.

The picture terrified her. Willy nilly again, her imagination conceived Elizabeth, John, Philip, Maurice knowing that this man had once been her lover. And only a casual lover—only an episode—at that.

"You ought never to have let him come here", thought continued. "This must be the last time. Positively."

Yet wasn't that rather absurd? Didn't the mere fact that the whole episode had been so casual demand that it should be forgotten? Must one still pay, at thirty-seven, for a folly committed at twenty-three?

The precise implication of that one word, "pay", escaped her. Only with the cheese and celery on the table—only with Elizabeth excusing herself, "I'm afraid I'll have to run away now, Cousin Rupert; I've promised to take Nan, of course you remember her, into Laxford"—did she begin to realise how difficult it might be to stick to her determination that this ne'er-do-well must never visit the Manor again.

For was Rupert—all said and done—such a ne'er-do-well? Weren't his follies, too, excusable? Mightn't he have got over them? After all, one couldn't expect every young man to be a . . . Carteret. The world had to have its laughing, no less than its worthy cavaliers.

Laura, making household duties her excuse, had followed Elizabeth out of the dining room. Rupert was commenting on the pictures.

"Velasquez", he said. "Gosh, what a painter. Look at the high lights on that velvet. Pretty grim-looking old bird, though. Who was he?"

Charlotte told him.

"I wonder what the seventeenth-century lot on our side of the family were", he went on. "Highwaymen or horse-copers, I expect. But that wouldn't explain Gertrude"—he hesitated a second—"or you."

The personal turn he had given to the conversation made her a little uncomfortable. She changed the subject, asking,

"Are you going to drive all the way back to London without breaking your journey?"

He said casually, "I may. It rather depends on the car. She's a bit temperamental"; and finished his port just as Simeon came in to announce, "Coffee is ready in the Long Gallery, m'lady".

Over their coffee, his constant smile compelled her to ask him why he was so amused.

"Feudalism", he confessed, "always amuses me. There's something so gloriously inhuman about it. Coffee is served in the Long Gallery, m'lady. The carriage waits, m'lady. I don't know how you manage to live up to it. Don't you ever want to do something really idiotic? Smash one of the vases or cock a snook at one of the footmen?"

"I used to when I was first married", admitted Charlotte—and stopped dead.

They were on dangerous ground again. The sooner he went the better. Only—did she want him to go? After all there was a certain excitement about this meeting. And latterly, excitement had been all too rare.

He took no advantage of the admission she had made. His attention, seemingly, had returned to the pictures.

"I envy you this one", he said, walking over to the little Rembrandt. "In fact there are a lot of things I envy you. I had a hunt about a fortnight ago. Only cubbing. But we managed to get one decent run—and, well, it was the first time I'd been out for five years.

"These blokes I've been staying with", he went on, "don't hunt. And their pheasants flap over like a lot of chickens. You had your opening meet yesterday, I heard. What sort of a day was it?"

"Oh, not too bad."

"Does that girl of yours hunt?"

"She did—last season."

"But she's not going to, this."

He had returned to where she was sitting. Something in his eyes told her that he knew more than he had admitted. He went on again, "Nice girl. We had quite a long talk on the way up to the house. As you told me at Lord's—a trifle romantic"

"You don't mean to say she confided in you, Rupert?"

"The poor darling couldn't very well help it. She'd forgotten she was wearing the young gentleman's diamond. But I promised every discretion. So please don't give me away."

He smiled again. Beyond the big mullioned window, the sun still shone.

"You ought to have a look round before you go", said Charlotte, feeling awkward again.

"A spot of fresh air would be rather nice. But aren't those shoes and stockings rather thin for walking?"

"Perhaps they are. I'll run up and change them."

Making her way up the newelled staircase, entering her bedroom, changing into a pair of brogues, John Carteret's widow could not help remembering a ship's cabin and her husband's voice saying, "You'd better have this on. It won't be any too warm, my dear".

But the precise implication of that thought, also, escaped her. She could even feel a little annoyed with Rupert for being quite such a perfect lady's man.

"The last time", she repeated to herself. "Positively. I'll just show him the horses. Then he must go."

§ 4

Meanwhile Rupert Whittinghame—alone in this museum of a room—had very nearly come to an identical conclusion; though arriving at it by very different roads.

"Might settle down one of these days", he mused. "Ought to settle down one of these days. But not in a place like this. Not with a woman like Charlotte. Need somebody who's a little younger. Somebody who's a little less m'lady. And fancy me as the stepfather of a grown-up family."

All the same . . .

All the same—continued his musing as he lit himself yet another Sullivan—Charlotte was a very lovely woman; and he had been thinking about her, intermittently, ever since that second day at Lord's.

"Haven't even had a real adventure since then", he remem-

bered. "Except that French girl at Deauville. Feel I'm beginning to need one. Getting rather bored as Saint Anthony."

But would there be any relief from boredom if he essayed an affair with Charlotte? And was she "that sort"?

"You know jolly well she isn't", he decided.

So why the dickens had he sent her that telegram? Why the blazes was he here? Only because he'd had one of his romantic fits on him. And after all he was getting a bit long in the tooth for romance.

Flinging his cigarette into the groined fireplace he made up his mind—in so far as Rupert ever made up a mind whose processes had always been governed by the momentary circumstance—to start for London within the hour and eschew further meetings. Hearing Charlotte's feet on the staircase, meeting her by one of the armoured figures in the hall, he still imagined this resolution altogether firm.

As they left the house by the bridge over the sunk garden, he even managed to tell himself, "You've done a lot of things in your life you're not too proud about, but nobody can ever say you married for money".

And, of course, this woman had.

Unaware of the confusion in his thoughts—almost as unaware as she of the physical attraction which had never quite ceased to exist between them—he recalled only a dim memory of his rage when he first heard of her engagement to "that fellow, Carteret". Long and long ago, he had forgiven her for marrying Carteret. She'd been right to marry for money and position. There hadn't been enough of the artist, of the bohemian, of the rolling stone about her to marry for any other reason.

Only—had the fellow made her happy? Was she happy now?

More memories, more sentimentality assailed him as they made their way round the house—stopping every now and again while she pointed out this or that feature of the gardens—towards the stables. In one way, at least, she had not been too happy. Otherwise . . .

But what was the use of harking back? "*Iti-bas*", he

thought, in the language which had come back to him so easily during that one real adventure, "*toutes les violettes meurent.*"

And his memories receded, though the sentimentality remained.

Charlotte, too—though her resolution still seemed adamant—was feeling slightly sentimental, not so much about herself as about him.

Rupert—with Leacock now escorting them round the loose boxes—was so entirely in his element. The very horses appeared to recognise this, snuffing and nuzzling at him as they were unrugged.

Spot, Elizabeth's fox terrier—Charlotte, herself, was not a doggy woman—had accompanied them. Spot, also, testified affection—though the only other male he ever condescended to notice was Maurice. And at the kennels, which they visited after they had made their round of the boxes, Negus, Maurice's big Labrador, who could never bear John or Philip to touch him, licked Rupert's hand through the bars.

"I wonder you don't keep more of 'em in the house", he said. "What that Gallery of yours really needs is a couple of Irish wolfhounds. And", pointing at it, "why no pigeons in the cote?"

She answered, a trifle sharply, "Pigeons make such a mess. I never can understand why people want to turn their country houses into zoos".

Rupert laughed at that; and she realised, abruptly, that it was the first time he had given way to laughter since they crossed the bridge.

"Is he really as happy as he always pretends to be?" she caught herself thinking. "Doesn't he ever get depressed, like I do?"

For, as they turned away from the kennels, depression seemed to be threatening again. No longer was she afraid of Rupert—only of the moment when he would have to go.

It struck her as so silly that Rupert should have to go; with all those horses—nine of them, including John's Diomedé and Philip's Corker, which Leacock had simply insisted on having up because of the weather, and the two greys she had

bought for Elizabeth before she had been told about her promise to Dwight—simply eating their heads off.

After all, Rupert had taught her to ride. Obviously he wouldn't be able to afford to hunt. And . . . and why shouldn't she do what she liked for once? She was a free woman.

Nevertheless . . .

§ 5

. . . Nevertheless it was that sudden puff of wind, that sudden chilling of the air, that abrupt blotting-out of the sunshine as the black clouds swept across the valley from King's Oak Hill, which did most to weaken Charlotte's resolution, which made her say, as they ran round the terrace and into the front of the house with the first rain drops spattering :

"You'll never get all the way to London in this weather. You'd better let us put you up and take the whole day for it".

Or so at least she thought. Much as Rupert thought, "No harm in having a roof instead of a Cape Cart hood over one's head if it's really going to come down cats and dogs".

Actually, however, it was Laura who forced the situation by saying, over the crumpets, "We really ought to keep Captain Whittinghame with us for tomorrow if he's brought his hunting things with him".

"Have you?" asked Charlotte.

Rupert's eyes twinkled.

"Thought those blokes at Laxford might find me a screw for the opening meet", he admitted ; and went to bed full of good port, thinking, "God bless that storm".

CHAPTER NINETEEN

§ 1

"I'm not in love with him", thought Charlotte, some weeks later. "Even if I were, I wouldn't marry him. So why did I ask him down for Christmas? Why did I ever let it begin?"

She tried to tell herself—with Laxford Town still some way ahead and Travers driving the ice-bound road at a careful twenty—that she had not actually "let it begin"; that the beginning had been entirely Laura's fault; that, once Laura suggested Rupert should stay on for a day's hunting, it had been impossible—unless one were positively rude—not to second the suggestion.

But that tale—she realised—was merely disingenuous; not even half-true.

Actually, she had leaped at Laura's suggestion. Neither could she blame Laura for the fact that Rupert, after that one day in the hunting field, had stayed on to enjoy three more.

A whole week, he had stayed. Such a nice letter, he had written. And about a fortnight later, there had been their fortuitous meeting in London: "Hallo! Up in town for the Yuletide shopping, eh? Then what about letting me give you a spot of lunch?"

No harm, really, in accepting that invitation to lunch. No reason, really, why she shouldn't ask, towards the end of it, "I expect you're booked up for the Christmas week?"

But why hadn't she let well alone?

An unusual movement of the car, Maurice's, "I say, mater, did you feel that skid?" jerked her from contemplation. The kind of thoughts in which she had just been indulging landed one nowhere. Neither did regrets.

Since she was not in love with Rupert—since, even if she

were in love with Rupert, nothing would induce her to marry him—why not just accept the fact that she would be seeing him again within the next hour, and that she was looking forward to it?

One couldn't help liking people, any more than one could help disliking people. And she was not in this car merely for the purpose of meeting Rupert. She had other business in Laxford—cartridges to buy for John, Philip's martingale to fetch from the saddler, a commission or so from Mrs. Pettifer: "If you do happen to be going into town, m'lady, we could do with some more groceries . . ."

She opened her bag and took out Mrs. Pettifer's list. That, at least, was not disingenuous. And Maurice did need some warm gloves.

§ 2

The county town, reached while it was still daylight, looked its best. All its up-and-down streets were crowded, all its shop windows gay with Christmas fare. At the saddler's, they encountered Nan; at the grocer's, her father and stepmother, just back from their honeymoon.

"And how are you liking Harrow, young man?" asked the colonel.

"Awfully, sir", answered Maurice.

"What form did they put you in?"

"Four-three, sir", grinned Maurice.

Charlotte interposed, "He's the youngest boy there". Gladys Pettigrew said, "He's so tall. He might be fourteen. You really must bring him over for Nan's dance".

"I dance jolly well", interrupted Maurice. "All the girls at Miss Hornibrook's said so. They used to come over sometimes, when I was at my prep school. Hendersons, you know."

Charlotte rebuked him.

"But I do dance jolly well", he protested as they made their way to the hosier's. "Even Elizabeth says I do. So why shouldn't I say so? I think it's simply rot to pretend one can't do a thing when one can."

"Putting on side?" suggested Charlotte.

"Well, why shouldn't one, if one's got something to be sidey about?"

Remembering a confidence of Philip's, "Everybody's been lenient with him because he's such a kid and because it's his first term, but I'm afraid he's in for a lot of whoppings before he's finished", Maurice's mother contented herself with a terse, "For one reason because *I* don't happen to like it".

His mood changed immediately. He seized her hand, saying, "Then of course I won't do it, mater". Looking down at his serious little face, still with two faint scars under the left eye, Charlotte felt her whole heart go out to him in a great gush of tenderness—subsequently expressed at Mintons, the confectioner's, where he drank three cups of chocolate and almost caused a famine in eclairs.

Meanwhile the lamplighters had been making their rounds; and, emerging from Mintons, they found Travers in trouble with a choked burner.

"It's that carbide, m'lady", he grumbled.

"Well, don't be long, please. Captain Whittinghame's train is almost due. Can't you manage to get as far as the station with your sidelights?"

"I'd rather not, m'lady."

Charlotte's chauffeur continued his work with a safety pin. Maurice opened the door for her. She climbed in. Eventually Travers blew through the jet, screwed it back into the open headlamp and applied a successful match.

"Shall we be all right?" asked Maurice.

"I think we shall just manage it, dear."

But, although Charlotte spoke so calmly, it cost her something of an effort. Travers either didn't know his job, or didn't bother about it. It would serve the man right if she gave him notice.

Why should Rupert be kept waiting in this icy weather? It really was too infuriating.

The train, however—though they were more than five minutes late for it—did not arrive for another quarter of an hour.

§ 3

Rupert Whittinghame had no sense of time. His imagination, moreover, was far too active for him to realise that the train might be overdue. Why had Charlotte gone out of her way—dash it, she had gone out of her way—to find out his plans for Christmas? Why had she asked him to the Manor again?

And why had he jumped at her invitation? Just to get another day or so on those excellent horses?

Possibly.

On the other hand, possibly not.

Having lit himself the twentieth Sullivan of the day, he cleaned a patch of moisture from the window of his first-class compartment (empty since their last stop) with his newspaper, and looked out.

Hunting would be out of the question if this frost lasted. And it might last for the whole of his stay.

That would be damned annoying. But there might be certain compensations. If one wanted to make love to the lady. Only—did one want to make love to the lady?

Possibly.

On the other hand, possibly not.

“Wonder if that’s what I’m expected to do”, mused Rupert. “Might not be able to pull up once I got going. Jolly fond of her. Always have been. First love and all that. Too much money, though. Makes ’em too independent. And what about the brood?”

As usual, the attempt to concentrate brought on a mood of inconsequence. Since his return to England, life had treated him pretty well. The odds were that it would go on treating him pretty well. Once a fellow got into a run of luck, he needn’t worry.

“Shan’t worry”, decided Rupert; and fell to studying Ruff and his betting book. On several pages of the latter, were rough sketches. Some of these—he further decided—weren’t half-bad.

The slowing of the train warned him that he must be at the end of his journey. He stuffed the books into the pockets of

his check ulster; stood up; reached his hat box, his guncase and dressing case from the rack.

Then lights slid by; brakes went on; a voice called "Laxford Junction"; he stepped out to find Charlotte within three paces of him—and a moment later she was saying, "This is Maurice, my youngest son".

§ 4

"Niceish-looking lad", Rupert said to himself, as Maurice whipped off his cap before shaking hands. "More like his mother than the rest of 'em." Aloud, having noticed the scars, he asked, "Hallo, have you been to the wars, youngster?"

Maurice, not without pride, told the story of his weasel while Travers carried the hat box, the guncase and dressing case to the car.

A porter followed with Rupert's cabin trunk.

"Don't see how we're going to get this on the front seat", grumbled Travers. "And if I strap it on the grid, it'll make her tail swing."

"Then let me sit with you", chimed in Maurice, "and put it inside."

Charlotte demurred. But he overruled her.

"I shan't be a bit cold, mater", he continued. "Not with my new gloves on. And I like riding outside."

"Bosses you a bit, don't he?" laughed Rupert as they set off.

"Yes. I suppose he does", admitted Charlotte. "He certainly gets his own way too often. But then they all do. This is nineteen-thirteen you must remember."

"Things were a bit different when we were young, eh?"

"Better?" queried Charlotte.

"I don't know so much about that."

There was no light inside the car. Away from the station now, they could no longer see each other's faces. Soon the glass between them and the driving seat began to blur—giving them a curious sense of isolation, almost of intimacy.

"Have you got a lot of people in the house?" he asked.

"No. Only the children and you."

Speech stopped. Rupert bent forward to re-arrange the luggage. The car skidded, nearly throwing him into her lap.

"Nice of you to come and meet me", he went on when he had recovered himself. "Filthy weather. I ought to have brought skates instead of hunting boots. Is that lake of yours frozen?"

"Not yet. But I expect there'll be ice on it by tomorrow morning."

Speech stopped again. That sense of isolation, almost of intimacy, grew.

"A good many years since I taught you to skate——" began Rupert.

She took refuge in sarcasm, saying, "Couldn't you cast forward for a change? It's a little depressing to feel I'm quite so ancient".

"No offence intended", laughed Rupert. "By the way, how's the romance faring?"

"You mean Elizabeth's?"

"Is there another one?"

"Not unless you've found the young lady of your dreams since I last saw you."

"I'm afraid I've been too busy picking winners."

He quoted from his betting book, and asked her permission to smoke.

The spurt of the match showed him as debonair as ever. It seemed impossible that he should be close on forty. But the perfume of the Turkish tobacco jerked her thoughts away from him. Abruptly she remembered her husband—that last cigarette John always smoked before he came to bed.

"Why?" she asked herself; and again she took refuge in sarcasm, asking, "Have you done anything except bet since I last saw you?"

The repetition of the phrase, "Since I last saw you", however, did not pass Rupert by.

"A bit interested in my movements", he thought. "Good sign—if I wanted her to fall in love with me."

But did he want her to fall in love with him? Did he want

to fall in love with her? Marriage to a woman nearly his own age, with a ready-made family, would be pretty humdrum.

"I saw the poor old bombardier knocked out", he said. "That chap Carpentier is a regular fizzer. Though some fellows say it's really his trainer. He's supposed to hypnotize him or something. Oh, and I went to a jolly good show the other night. Chinese melodrama. *Mr. Blue* or some such name. That chap Lang's in it. Jolly good he is, too. Plays the Chinese bloke. You know, you ought to come up to town more often. Then we could do some shows together."

Charlotte said, a little primly, "I usually bring the boys up for the last few days of the holidays. They're very fond of the theatre. Especially Philip".

As she spoke, Maurice tapped on the window. His face, grinning at them through the blurred glass, seemed to dispel all sense of intimacy. Even when he turned away, they remained selfconscious, almost shy.

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CHAPTER TWENTY

§ 1

THEIR descent from King's Oak Hill seemed to have taken away Charlotte's selfconsciousness. Twice they had skidded right on to the rimed grass at roadside ; and Rupert was still chaffing her as they came safely between the lodge gates into the drive.

"You nearly swooned", he said.

"I didn't like it", she admitted. "I haven't got any confidence in this chauffeur."

"He was right about not having my trunk on her tail, though."

She admitted that too ; and, doing so, could not help thinking what a help it would be when John was a little older and she could at least consult him about the menservants.

Responsibilities might be power—she decided—but sometimes they could be a little too much for a woman.

"I rather intended to sack Travers after the holidays", she went on. "My repair bills seem to go up every month. And I simply can't believe he needs so much petrol."

"Most of them chisel a bit", laughed Rupert. "After all you can afford it."

She wanted to say, "Isn't that like you ? You never did have any money sense". But somehow the remark seemed too intimate ; and by then they were on the terrace ; with Simeon, who had seen their headlights, just opening the double doors, and Maurice, who had jumped down as they came up the last slope, running alongside.

"It's only my feet", he said, stamping them as his mother descended. "But they're simply perished. Won't it be a damn shame if we don't get a hunt on Boxing Day ?"

"Your damns won't have any effect on the thermometer. And it isn't really a sign of manliness to use swear words."

Once more Charlotte rebuked her youngest, who accepted the rebuke in sulky silence, as they passed under the kind of ice-bright sky that would always have its memories for her, to stand before the huge log fire in the hall.

Rupert lit yet another of his cigarettes while they warmed themselves. Philip and Elizabeth lounged out of the morning room.

"Jolly nice to see you", said Philip, shaking hands. Elizabeth said, "Rather".

"Where's John?" asked Charlotte.

"Playing chess with Laura", answered Philip. "In her room. They've been hard at it ever since tea. I'll run up and tell him."

"Would that be too popular?" asked Rupert. "I know what chess is."

"We've been making you an American cocktail", cut in Elizabeth. "I expect it's pretty awful, but you simply must come and try it."

A delighted yelp from Spot, somnolent by the fire there, greeted her guest's appearance in the morning room. Watching him stoop to play with the dog, watching her three children group themselves about him, listening to his verdict on the cocktail, "Jolly good, but I fancy I'd put just a spot more gin into it next time", Charlotte was again aware of his fascination.

But John's absence annoyed her. John really must improve his manners. When she brought people home, it was his duty to welcome them.

She told him so, taking him apart for the purpose, just before she went up to dress for dinner; and that it was also his duty to show Rupert to his room.

§ 2

"Mother's perfectly right", thought John. "I ought to have been here to welcome the chap"; and as he re-entered the morning room he managed a conventional smile.

"There's no reason why you should have taken such a spite to him", thought continued. "Perhaps you're only envious."

Or was jealousy the truer word?

Chaps like this Rupert Whittinghame did make one feel a bit jealous—of their good looks, of their social ease, of their whole devil-may-care attitude to existence. Yet at the same time one couldn't help despising them. They were so infernally superficial. Mere middle-aged knuts!

Nevertheless one had one's obligations—even towards knuts; and John was still managing to keep that smile on his heavy young face as he said, "I think it's about time we followed mother's example, don't you, sir?"

"If you go on calling me sir", laughed Rupert, "I shall insist on calling you Sir John."

He swigged off the dregs of his second cocktail, and patted Maurice's head, saying, "Good night, youngster". Maurice grinned up at him, "Why good night? I'm allowed down to dinner now I'm at Harrow".

"As grown up as all that, eh?"

"Rather."

"Drink your port, too, I expect."

"No. But I'd jolly well like to."

"Good kid that", commented Rupert to John as they made their way up the staircase. "Your mother tells me he's quite a cricketer."

"Oh, Maurice is all right", agreed John loyally. "Though he is such a lazy young devil."

"Aren't we all that way at his age? I know I was. How are you liking Cambridge? I expect it's changed a good bit since my time." And, going out of his way to make friends with this rather reserved youth, Rupert succeeded in detaining him for several minutes.

All the same it was something of a relief when his bedroom door closed behind Charlotte's eldest son, more than ever like his father since that moustache had begun to grow—and obviously...

"... Hostile?" mused Rupert, emptying out his pockets on the oak dressing table and lighting yet another cigarette at one of the candles. And the question depressed him all the while he dressed.

He had brought three Christmas presents—having decided, after some thought, that it would be easier to tip for the other

two—a Rackham book for Charlotte, a big box of Charbonnel and Walker sweets for Elizabeth, two pipes in a case for John. But he had forgotten all about Laura Marston.

And tomorrow would be Christmas Eve.

"Have to make some excuse for running into Laxford", he decided. "Can't leave the poor old skate out. She'd be hurt. If there's one thing I can't stick, it's hurting people."

Over dinner, accordingly, he went out of his way to be attentive to Laura, who said to Elizabeth, when she found herself alone with her and Charlotte by the enormous fire in the Gallery, "I think he's one of the most charming men I've ever met in my life. Don't you agree, dear?"

"Yes", answered Elizabeth promptly. After a moment or so for reflection, however, she added, "Somehow or other, though, I can't imagine he's very reliable. What do you think, mother?"

Charlotte wanted to say, "I agree with you"; and only checked herself just in time.

§ 3

The knowledge that Rupert never had been "very reliable"—coupled with a curious conviction, none the less certain because she blamed herself for its unfairness, that he was far too old for his habits of life to undergo any radical change—irritated Charlotte during the rest of the evening.

Yet even more irritating—and this seemed even more curious—proved the thought that Elizabeth should have voiced the criticism. She wanted Elizabeth to like Rupert. She wanted all her children to like Rupert. Not that she was in love with the man. Not that she had the vaguest intention of marrying him. But just to demonstrate that she had made no mistake when she invited him to spend Christmas with them.

Alone in her bedroom, nevertheless, she again accused herself of being disingenuous. She wanted her children to like Rupert because there was just a chance that she had fallen in love with him—or rather re-fallen in love with him.

Idiotic as that might seem.

Yet after all—mused Charlotte when she woke next

morning—was it so idiotic to fall in love, or even to contemplate a second marriage? Elizabeth, barring accidents, would soon go off with her Dwight. John had as good as decided on a career which would keep him in London. As the years went by, Philip was bound to leave her. And how long would even Maurice remain a child?

"A lonely middle age", she caught herself thinking as she presided over the breakfast table. "That's what I'm headed for."

And old age would be even lonelier. So why not let one's imagination play with a different possibility? Because of money? How sordid. Besides—even under the will as it stood—and hadn't John assured her that it shouldn't stand in the event of her re-marriage?—she'd have enough for two.

Imagination, by the time it reached that stage, seemed a little out of hand. She applied the curb; and went to her household businesses, leaving John to entertain Rupert, who had just said, "That sounds rather a good scheme. There certainly ought to be a few snipe about in this sort of weather".

"If you're going after snipe", begged Maurice, "may I come too, and bring Negus? He's the most marvellous retriever."

"And one of my very best pals", said Rupert. "We had a beat round the boundaries the last time I was here. As a matter of fact, I did a sketch of him."

"I say, did you really? I wish you'd show it to me. I simply can't draw dogs. And I'm not too good at horses either."

§ 4

All that morning Maurice and Negus followed at Rupert's heels across the frozen marsh-ground, and all that morning Rupert never missed a bird.

His shooting roused even John's admiration; and when, on their return through the home covers, he brought down a brace of woodcock with a right and left, even the Carteret reserve thawed to open praise.

"Just luck, old chap", said Rupert. "Wouldn't come off once in a hundred times. You'll shoot a jolly sight better than I do before you've finished."

"What on earth makes you say that?"

"Well, for one thing, you're steadier. You should just see me on one of my off days. Sometimes I can't hit a haystack."

The modesty and the compliment did their work. During lunch it was John—his slightly over-developed conscience reproachful—who went out of his way to make friends. While after lunch—with Rupert wondering, "If anyone happens to be going into Laxford"—Philip leaped at the opportunity to show off his driving.

Charlotte tried to insist that they must take Travers; but Rupert persuaded her that it wasn't necessary; and the pair of them returned, safe and sound, by tea time.

Afterwards John suggested billiards—and refused to take any points.

"Evidence of my misspent youth", laughed Rupert, running out his hundred with a break of forty-five. And by Christmas morning even a fresher at St. Jude's, with two new pipes to colour, was eating out of his hand.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

§ 1

It was many years since Rupert had seen the inside of a church. But he went that Christmas morning; and as he knelt beside Charlotte he fell to imagining himself a changed man.

"No reason why I shouldn't be", he decided. "Haven't been any worse than most of 'em. Just a little more open about it, perhaps."

But the service proved a little too long for his mood; and, during the sermon, only the artist in him still appreciated the unusual scene.

"Make a good picture", he thought, his eyes wandering from the figure in the sixteenth century pulpit to those other figures grouped here and there between Gothic pillars twined with holly. But somehow he could not see himself in this picture. It was too domestic. 'Too tame!'

"Things might have been different if I'd had a place of my own", he brooded. "M.F.H.—and all that sort of thing. Might even have been different if I'd really had to work for my living. But I'm neither the one kind nor the other. And I can't believe in this religious business. So what's the good of pretending I do?"

But on that his eyes turned to those three flags, hanging over the decorated altar; and he grew conscious of a peculiar exaltation. Once upon a time, things *had* been different. During the Boer war.

Dash it all, a chap had known where he was during that war. And if only there'd been another one, he might have done some good for himself. But peacetime soldiering. Parades. Manœuvres. Dinners in mess. Too tame again. No wonder he'd blotted his copybook.

"I'm an adventurer", he decided.

Yet how long could one go on adventuring? A chap had to settle down sometime or other. And if one could settle down on a really good wicket . . . say with some woman of whom one was really fond . . . with whom one wouldn't have to rough it . . . as one had had to rough it with poor Millie.

On which, as usual, Rupert's attempt at introspection brought on a mood of inconsequence; which reached its height after their return to the Manor, where he insisted on kissing Laura under the mistletoe, "Just because this frost looks like breaking".

"Bet you a shilling it doesn't", said John.

By tea time, however, a light drizzle was falling; and, as they sat over their port that Christmas night, Rupert interrupted a little lecture on, "Home Rule. I'm all for it, though of course I don't like the idea of our having to coerce Ulster", with a joyous:

"Never mind politics, old chap. They can keep. Pay up that bob you owe me—and look pleasant. We're going to have a hunt tomorrow".

And shortly after breakfast on the Boxing Day, he was twisting the elastic round Charlotte's boot.

§ 2

Once again, as he mounted his roan Diomedes, John Carteret experienced that jealousy of Rupert, already trotting off, side by side with Charlotte, on one of the greys. A clumsy horseman himself, though bold enough when hounds ran, he would have given a good deal to possess that easy seat and those obviously perfect hands—to say nothing of that double-breasted cutaway red-coat, those particular boots and breeches, and that hat.

Or was it the way the fellow wore his hat, the way he wore all his clothes, the whole devil-may-care-ness of him that one really envied? Be blowed if one knew.

Meanwhile Philip—in black like his elder brother—had mounted the bay Corker; and Maurice was already cantering his chestnut pony in pursuit of the other two.

"That kid'll break his neck one of these days", remarked

Philip. "Gosh, look at that. Lucky you're not riding him, Elizabeth."

For the grey, hearing the pony behind it, had given one good buck and was now fighting its hardest for a gallop. Rupert's, "Steady, me lad. Steady", carried back to them on a rising breeze as they trotted off the terrace. But it was Diomedes who made most trouble at the first gate; and Rupert who held it open for the little cavalcade to pass through.

"Holding him a bit tight, aren't you?" suggested Rupert, catching up at a hand canter. "They're all a bit on the fresh side this morning."

He rode on after Charlotte and Maurice. Diomedes continued to fidget till they reached the big field at the foot of King's Oak Hill, where John let him have his head—and only just succeeded in stopping him halfway up the ride through Abercorn Wood.

A mile of turnpike followed. Taking to the fields again, they fell in with Nan, her father and stepmother. Rupert swept off his hat. Nan dimpled at him, "Lady Carteret told me you were coming to the Manor for Christmas. She's bringing you over to us tomorrow evening. We've got a dance on".

"What a flirt the girl is", thought Philip; and told her so a few minutes later as they brought up the rear of the party.

"Well, what else is there to do if one lives in the country?" countered Nan. Then, thoughtfully, "But I've never been a poacher".

The innuendo puzzled Philip. Only as they trotted the last of the short cut to pull up near the outskirts of Laxford, did he remember how Nan's eyes, a trifle sly and a trifle too small for her face, had glanced forward at his mother and Rupert while she spoke.

"Little cat", he thought.

But the idea of his mother even wanting to flirt with anybody seemed so absurd that he changed the thought to, "Little idiot"; and so dismissed the whole incident from his mind.

§ 3

Laxford Market Place, when the party from the Manor clattered into it over the cobbles of Piemakers Alley, was already a jam of horsemen and horsewomen, grooms, dog carts, farmers' gigs, cyclists and footfolk. Here and there stood a motor car. In the centre, by the fountain, were master, huntsman, hunt servants and hounds.

"Your chauffeur seems to have missed the bus, Charlotte", said Rupert, glancing at the black and gold clock over the Town Hall.

"Travers had a puncture just at the foot of the hill, m'lady", explained Leacock, riding up to them on Charlotte's second horse. "Miss Elizabeth and Miss Marston will be here in a minute. They're walking."

But by the time Charlotte saw Elizabeth's red tam-o'-shanter and Laura's feathers between the colonnades at the corner of Terminus Street, the mayor and the master had drunk the obligatory toast from the cup presented to her "loyal cityzenes of Laxford Towne" by Queen Elizabeth; the huntsman's whip was cracking, and the crowd had divided to let hounds through.

"All very picturesque", commented Rupert, as he and Charlotte rode back side by side through the Alley. "But hardly conducive to a good day's hunting."

"Not as bad as Kirby Gate", said Charlotte.

"I've never assisted at that function."

"I have—once. But that side of the Quorn country's too far. I like riding to my meets—and home again. Can you see what's happened to the others?"

Rupert rose in his stirrups and looked over his shoulder. "Maurice is about six files behind us", he announced. "The rest nowhere."

"I told him he was to stay back with Leacock."

"What a hope—with that kid!" And Rupert laughed.

Once out of Piemakers Alley, they struck macadam, and the head of the column broke into a jog. The noise of the many hoofs made conversation difficult even for Rupert; and Charlotte relapsed into thought.

Her youngest son's disobedience had annoyed her. Today there was bound to be a certain amount of wild riding. Maurice really ought to keep with the second horsemen. She really must discipline Maurice. Her mother had been quite right not to keep him at Hendersons for those two extra terms.

"It's curious", she thought, "that he's so different from the others."

But, once off the road with the boy riding up to grin, "I couldn't see Leacock and Tom anywhere, so I thought I'd better come along with the crowd. It's all right, isn't it?" she simply had not the heart to scold him. She only caught herself wishing that John or Philip or Elizabeth were as keen.

Meanwhile, with half the field still on the road, hounds were already drawing Three Corner Wood. Presently they gave tongue; and Rupert asked, "Hadn't we better move up a bit?"

"Just as well", said Charlotte.

He edged his grey up the slope towards the hedge that cut the skyline at the far corner of the wood. The chestnut pony followed her own big black.

"You won't get over it", she went on to Maurice; and, pointing with her whip, "Make for that gap, and stay this side. Otherwise you may head him."

"All right, mater"; and Maurice, for once obedient, trotted off.

"I think he could have managed it", Rupert disputed with her as they pulled up about fifty yards from the low cut-and-laid.

"You wouldn't risk it if he were your son—especially if you'd seen the ditch the other side."

"They never come to much harm at that age", said Rupert nonchalantly, as he cocked a leg forward to tighten the grey's girth.

Hounds were still giving tongue, but intermittently, and at the far side of the wood. Most of those who had followed them up the slope were turning back.

"If he does break this way", said Rupert in a low voice, "we really might get a hunt."

"That's what happened three years ago. And the wind was about the same then."

To both of them, the chance words brought memories. Just for a second Charlotte saw this same dun sky, this very patch of field, and the man who had been her husband galloping, while she rode straight at her fence, for that very gap to which she had just sent Maurice. Just for a second Rupert saw, silhouetted against the blaze of sunshine beyond the verandah of their East African bungalow, the figure of Millicent.

"It doesn't seem much like Christmas", Millicent was saying.

Then Rupert's memories vanished; and he was only aware of Charlotte, of what a figure she made in her top hat, in her perfectly cut habit.

"Wonderful", thought Rupert. "She hasn't aged a year since . . . since I made her love me." And, on that, other recollections assailed him—till the hound music drove them away.

Hounds were on a hot scent. Hounds had turned; were coming their way again. He heard the hoofs of the huntsman's horse rap logs. Grey's ears and black's were both cocked. From beyond the hedge, a whipper-in signalled them to keep back.

One last burst of hound music.

One twang of the horn.

Another twang.

And, almost before either of them knew the fox had broken, the whipper-in was signalling, "Forrard", bellowing, "Gone away".

§ 4

Charlotte's black Patricia remembered the ditch on the far side of that first cut-and-laid as well as the woman she carried—and cleared it in easy style. But the grey was only a seven-year-old, corned to the eyes and new to the country. Rupert had to take one good pull before he closed his legs. Even so, they only just got over.

"Put me down if I can't steady him", he thought; and looked for hounds.

They were away on a breast-high scent, already two hundred yards ahead down the ridge-and-furrow. He glanced to his left; saw horses leaping, two crowds stampeding for

two open gates. He glanced to his right. Maurice on his chestnut pony was cutting along in fine style.

Charlotte's black still led him, but only by a couple of lengths, as hounds streamed up and over the next fence and huntsman followed.

"Looks like a regular squire-trap", thought Rupert; and pulled wide from Charlotte to take his own line.

He had a glimpse of her as he galloped by—but no time for memories. The grey was fighting for his head. The fool thought it was a steeplechase. All young horses were fools—and most old horses. That huntsman had taken off as though there were two ditches. There must be two. And the one this side looked as deep as the devil. Got to go for it, though.

Rupert's legs closed again. The grey gathered his hocks under him. His forehead lifted. They were in mid air. They were over. But again only just.

"Teach you a lesson, m'lad", muttered Rupert, as the grey half-pecked.

He was all steamed up by then—ready to break his own neck or anyone else's—Charlotte, Maurice, the whole field forgotten. Four hundred yards ahead, rose timber. Hounds were through it. He saw the huntsman and the whipper-in who had given the "Gone away" steady their horses. Both cleared the post-and-rails. The grey never would. Not at this pace. He gave him the curb, once, twice, and again; leaned forward; saw the top rail below his knees; heard it smash behind him; whooped as he galloped on.

They were in a long valley now. Flat fields. Easier fences. Hounds had vanished beyond the next one. They must be running mute. They must be running like a railway train. There went the whipper-in. There went the huntsman. Rupert's dark eyes glanced to his left. Not a soul. They glanced to his right. Not a soul. He glanced backwards, left and right; saw a horse, another horse, come over the timber by the broken rail.

The knowledge that he led the field roused all the egoist in him. He was one hell of a horseman. He always had been one hell of a horseman. Even old Tubby knew that with his:

Their loss. Not his. Soldiering indeed. A ruddy girls' school. Hacking a chap out just because he couldn't settle up on the Monday. What was soldiering anyway? Just riding and shooting. He'd been the best shot in the regiment as well as the best horseman. So damn 'em. Damn 'em and blast 'em for a lot of silly school-marms.

"Wish I had the squadron behind me, though", thought the man who had missed his vocation, as his grey took another low cut-and-laid like a veteran; and he whooped again as he hared on in pursuit of whipper-in and huntsman.

But beyond the next fence, with hounds in view once more and his instinct for a country warning him to beware of water, Rupert's thoughts concentrated between his horse's ears.

Blackthorn ahead now. High. But plenty of thin stuff in it. Nothing to worry about. Only—only what lay beyond?

The valley had narrowed. Soft ground here. Clods flying from those hoofs still ahead of him. Marsh grass there on his left. A wisp of snipe getting up. *Must* be water about. A dip in the ground on the other side of that fence? Yes. Definitely. He could hardly see huntsman's scarlet, only a narrow flash of it, the velvet cap.

Huntsman's cap disappeared from view.

Whip lifted to shield face, reins bunched in left hand, Rupert went for the place he had picked; and felt the tug of his hat on its hunting string as he charged through.

Water all right. There it was—just below him—not fifty yards below him—and both banks poached to blazes—some nasty stakes too—on the take-off side, on the landing side.

Hounds were across though. The huntsman was going for it. The whipper-in would go for it. There they went. Gosh, what leaps. Could the grey do it? Hounds were checking. Hounds were at their noses. Need the grey do it? Damn it, the grey should do it. He must do it.

Spurs home, reins loose, hat flying, Rupert picked his own place, cleared the water.

"What a horseman", thought the younger of the two who watched him; but the elder, "What a fool!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

§ 1

CHARLOTTE, who had taken an easier line down the valley, saw hounds at their noses ; pulled to a hand canter, and made for the known bridge. Clattering over the trestles and wheeling to her right along the fringe of Black Wood, she wondered what had happened to Maurice—and if Rupert had negotiated Abercorn Brook.

“Fun if it pounded him”, she thought. “Rupert never could bear to be out of the first flight.”

But at that—altogether ridiculously—she experienced one twinge of fear. Accordingly—if even more ridiculously—it was a positive relief, as she rounded the south corner of the wood, to see that scarlet figure on the grey.

“Gone to ground I fancy”, said Rupert when she rode up to him. “Good animal, this. Nasty place—especially where I came over.”

He pointed with his whip. She saw where the grey’s hoofs must have landed.

“Thought I was for it”, went on Rupert. “Ought to have followed the other two. Why don’t you have those stakes done away with ? They’ll kill somebody one of these days.”

Years afterwards, she was to remember those words ; but at the time she only laughed, “If you will try to cut everybody down and hang them up to dry, don’t blame the committee when you end by breaking your neck”.

All the same, the thought of that huge leap thrilled her ; and she showed it to Maurice when he galloped up, inordinately pleased with himself, well ahead of John, Philip and Nan.

“I say”, gasped Maurice. “Did Cousin Rupert really jump it there ?” But a moment or so later, with hounds still at fault, she heard him boasting to Nan, “When I’m grown up and

have got proper horses instead of just ponies, you won't catch me going for gates and gaps. I'll give you all a lead then".

John said, "Shut up, you little swankpot". Nan chaffed, "Don't take any notice of him, Maurice. It's just because he's jealous of you".

And that also Charlotte was to remember in the after years ; though at the time, with Gladys Pettigrew riding up to ask, "You haven't seen my old gentleman anywhere about, have you ? He must have cut a voluntary. Anyway I've lost him", the words hardly registered in her mind.

The colonel—his hat well dented and his white breeches well plastered—joined them almost at once. Master and huntsman, after several more vain casts, decided to try for another fox. Black Wood seemed to hold half a dozen ; but none of them would break ; and towards one o'clock the whole cavalcade, cyclists and footfolk in its wake, took to the road once more.

"Told you so", grumbled Rupert, jig-jogging beside Charlotte. "Always the same on a Boxing Day. How about that kid of yours ? I should have thought this would have been about enough for him."

The grumble irritated, the thoughtfulness pleased her.

"Characteristic", she thought ; and something made her say, "You've taken quite a fancy to Maurice, haven't you ?"

Something made him say, "Yes. I suppose I have. But they're a good all-round litter. You ought to be jolly proud of them".

A little above herself she flashed back at him, "I'm not sure I ought to approve of that simile".

"Hardly *comme il faut*, I admit", he laughed at her. "But then I never could live up to the county all the time."

"You've done remarkably well so far—couldn't you keep it up a little longer ?"

"I'll do my very best, m'lady."

Chaffing each other, memories stirred again. When, at the next cover, Leacock and Tom brought them their second horses, Rupert insisted on mounting her. There was another

thrill—though she despised herself for it—in the sheer strength, the sheer grace of him. She sought refuge—again despising herself—in severity towards Maurice.

“By the time you’ve ridden her all the way home”, she said, “your Poppy will have had more than enough. So don’t argue.”

“But I wasn’t arguing. I only wanted to know what Cousin Rupert thought.”

“If you really want to know”, said Rupert, “I think you’re an impertinent young puppy to bandy words with your mother.”

The boy’s face fell. Just for a second Charlotte wondered if he were going to burst into tears. Then he gave Rupert a mock salute, wrenched his pony’s head round, and followed Leacock and his helper off the field.

§ 2

That incident also—and her subsequent rebuke, “You needn’t have been so brutal. Maurice is sensitive, though he does work so hard to conceal it”—Charlotte was destined to recall, poignantly, in the after years.

But with Maurice waving his whip from the road, and John coming up to say, “Nan doesn’t think she ought to go on and I’m rather fed up, so I think I’ll ride home with her”, she was all the hunting woman again; and remained so till they whipped off after a long ringing hunt which gave Rupert, always more interested in horse work than hound work, little pleasure—though it ended in a kill.

Philip had pulled out an hour back.

The field, by now, was a mere fifty—and many of these trotted off, a few handed over their horses to their grooms and climbed into their dog carts or motor cars, while Charlotte was introducing Rupert to the master, who said, pointing to the last car, “Stinking beastly things. But I’ve had to take to one. Doctor’s orders. ’Fraid I’ll have to give up next year. Getting a bit too much for me”, before he also dismounted.

“Do we follow hounds?” asked Rupert. “They go our way if my memory’s accurate.”

"It'll be quicker across country." Charlotte looked round the darkling horizon. "But we mustn't dwell on it."

She kicked her bay off the grass at roadside and over a low fence on to light plough. Skirting this, they came to an open gate and a bridle path.

"How far is it to the Manor?" asked Rupert.

"Not more than ten miles."

"Take us the best part of an hour. What about a spot of tea somewhere? I'm as thirsty as the devil and the old flask's empty."

"Can't you wait?"

"I can. But I'd hate to."

"All right. We'll try one of the farms. Only let's get on a bit farther."

"Right you are."

Their second horses were still fresh. Trotting briskly, they came to the end of the bridle path and back to the bridge across Abercorn Brook.

"Eerie-looking place in this half-light", commented Rupert. "Gives me the shivers."

"Black Wood's supposed to be haunted", said Charlotte as they turned up the slope. "Ware holes. We'd better walk 'em till we're out of it."

They walked into pitch darkness. Rupert had to dismount and light a match before he could open the gate at the end of the ride.

Waiting for him to close the gate, Charlotte was again aware of his fascination. Forgotten feelings began to stir. Once, this man had been her lover. Did he remember? Did she want him to? Did she want this old lover back?

"No", she thought. "I hated myself so—afterwards."

But she had only hated herself because of the disloyalty to John.

He remounted, and they rode on again, under the very last of the dusk, down a dirt road and across a ridge-and-furrow. Presently they came on wheel tracks, and saw lights.

"Your tea", laughed Charlotte, as a dog barked at them, and windows gleamed beyond the angle of a rough stable. She called into the stable, "Is that you, Smart?" A voice

answered, "Yes, m'lady", and a man in breeches with a wisp of straw between his hands emerged from the gloom under the tiles.

"Just giving my old mare a rub down", he went on. "Could we be offering you anything, m'lady?"

"If the kettle's on, Smart."

"Surely."

The farmer, having shouted to his dog, "Quiet there, Towser", took their horses. They walked across the yard up to the house. Charlotte opened the back door without knocking. They found themselves in a red-tiled kitchen, hams pendent from its rafters, a big fire blazing in its range.

"And how are you, Margaret?" asked Charlotte.

"Fine, thank you, m'lady."

The brown-haired young woman who had been bending over the hob wiped her right hand on a clean cloth before she took Charlotte's. Charlotte introduced Rupert, saying, "Margaret used to work for us at the Manor before she got married".

Rupert said, "I'm afraid we're rather dirty, Mrs. Smart".

"And thirsty, I'll be bound. My Bill drank three mugs of ale when he came in. Would you care for some ale, sir?"

"I'd rather have a cup of tea if it isn't too much trouble."

"So would I", said Charlotte.

The table was already laid. They sat down at it while the farmer's wife busied herself taking more crockery from the dresser. Charlotte had tucked up her veil. The mellow lamplight showed her face at its most alluring, still flushed with the hard exercise, her lips half-parted as she answered Margaret's questions: How were Sir John and Mister Philip? How were Miss Elizabeth and Master Maurice?

"It's high time you were having a family of your own, Margaret", said Charlotte, these curiosities satisfied.

"Surely. Me and Bill have been married over a year now. But somehow, the Lord he doesn't seem to want to bless us, m'lady."

And the young woman smiled as she set the big brown teapot in front of them, while Rupert thought, "How's that for

feudalism?" Yet somehow or other this aspect of feudalism was not without its charm.

"Lots of worse lives than a country gentleman's", he caught himself thinking; but from that his recollection drifted, faster than he was aware, back to those few days when he had made Charlotte love him; and he in his turn fell to asking himself "Does she remember?"

But of course she remembered. Women always did.

§ 3

Rupert's recollections did not interfere with his appetite. Neither did they impede his conversation. He put away three enormous slices of Margaret Smart's cake while he was discussing the day's run with her husband, who came in halfway through their meal; accepted a cherry brandy in exchange for one of his Sullivans—and was only induced back into the saddle by a forthright, "We really must be off", from Charlotte.

"Nice couple", he said, as they rode round the house under the laundry wires, and so on to a main road. "Tenants, I gather."

"Yes. He used to be rather troublesome about his repairs. But he's been better since he married."

"Refining influence of a good woman and all that sort of thing."

"Plus the fact that I reduced his rent for a wedding present."

Rupert laughed.

"One way and another, I suppose you've got quite a lot of business to do", he went on.

"Luckily."

"Why luckily?"

She had a sudden impulse to confidences.

"Life's a bit dull when the boys are away", she began—only to stop.

He repeated his, "You ought to come up to town more often".

Prim again—and subtly aware of danger—she countered, "So you've told me before. But I don't happen to like London".

"Pity", said Rupert; and just as he spoke they both heard the drumming of the car; saw its enormous headlights, still the best part of half a mile away, sweep round and up the foot of the long hill down which they were riding on loose reins.

"Blasted fool", muttered Rupert, as his horse's ears went back.

Charlotte's bay shied. In the split second before rushing lights blinded him, Rupert saw its hind hoofs strike sparks from the macadam. Then it was over the hedge, the car had roared by them, and his own mare had the bit between her teeth.

The mare's buck, jerking his left foot from the iron, had nearly unhorsed him. Before his knees were home she had got her three strides in, and was away down the hill.

He sat tight. There was nothing else to do. He let her have her head—hoping for the best, expecting the worst. Wind rushed at him. Hedges flew by. The hoofs stormed under, shaking his spine. The loose stirrup banged at his shin bone. He realised—coldly—that the road must make a right angle; half-guessed, half-saw the red Chinese lantern, the figure dismounting from the bicycle, the signpost, the grass, the wire fence, the trees.

Then he had his other foot out of the iron—and was letting himself fall.

§ 4

Rupert's last thought, before he dropped from saddle, had been for the mare. Breath knocked clean out of him, he just heard the cyclist's frightened shout, the signpost snapping, the hoofs still drumming; just realised that his last jerk at the curb must have warned her, turned her.

Then all thought left him in a rocket-burst of stars.

Subconsciously he was aware of pain. As he staggered to his feet, the stars staggered with him—circled flaming. Subconsciously he knew that he must wait for all these silver points and red circles to steady.

After a while they did steady, and he heard a voice.

The voice asked, "Be you all right?"

He did not hear himself answer.

The voice repeated its question.

He heard himself say, "Never mind about me".

The silver points, the red circles began to recede. Presently he could see a bearded face through them—and thought came back, slowly, painfully.

"Charlotte", he thought. Aloud he said, "Lady. Somewhere up the hill. May be hurt. Come and help me find her".

Pain was conscious now. It stabbed at his left lung, at his left leg. Automatically he put his left hand to the saddle of the bicycle, his right to the handlebar.

"Come on", he repeated.

"But you can't walk, sir." The man detached and held up his Chinese lantern. "You're hurt yourself. You're bleeding."

"Nonsense. Do as I tell you."

They set off, Rupert still supporting himself on the bicycle, the man walking beside him, up the hill.

Each step was a separate agony, conquered only by will power, by the thought that Charlotte might be lying unconscious. Each breath seemed as though it must tear him in pieces. Nausea gripped him by the bowels. Mad songs sang through his head. He could have sold paradise for one long black curse, for one black vomit. But if he vomited, if he even cursed, he would have to stop. And he mustn't. He mustn't. He must find out what had happened to Charlotte.

Then, dully, he heard hoofs walking down to them, and a hail: "You, there. You with the bike. Which way did that bolting horse go?"

He tried to hail back, but his voice failed him; and he could only whisper, huskily, "Glad you're all right. Thought something might have happened to you", as the head of Charlotte's bay loomed up out of the darkness beyond the red pool of lantern light.

The cyclist helped Charlotte to dismount. Rupert, speechless, was still supporting himself by saddle and handlebar. She saw that his hat had been torn from its string, that the left side of his face was a mass of blood, and the other side as white as the crumpled hunting stock.

"Glad you're all right", he repeated.

One leg gave under him. The bicycle fell over with a crash.

Dropping her whip, catching him just before he fell, supporting his whole inert weight before she laid him as gently as she might on the narrow verge of grass at roadside, Charlotte could not yet realise that he had laboured halfway up the hill in his anxiety for her.

That realisation only came to her minutes later as she watched the red lantern dwindle and disappear at hilltop into the main gate of Smart's Farm.

Rupert still lay unconscious. She shrugged herself out of her coat, made a bundle of it, stooped to him in the darkness, lifted his head, arranged the bundle behind his neck.

How badly had he been hurt? Was he going to die? Did it matter so much if he were going to die? Mightn't it be better if he did die?

"No. No. No", she heard herself say. "I want him. I want him."

And suddenly she was on her knees again, bending to him again. Close. So close that she could hear the faint whistle of the breath through his nostrils, that she could feel his heart beating.

Thank God for that. Thank God that he still lived—and for those lanterns, the red one and the two white ones, coming so fast down the hill towards her . . .

§ 5

. . . Charlotte Carteret had jumped to her feet again, she had unhitched the bay's reins from the gate, before the cyclist and Smart and one of his boys arrived with the blanket and the hurdle.

"You must get him to the farm yourselves", she said, shrugging herself into her coat. "It'll take the three of you. Help me up. I'm going for the doctor."

But the Manor was only three miles away, and the doctor's house a good five.

She covered those three miles in less than ten minutes to find Leacock and Simeon waiting for her on the terrace.

"When that mare came back without the captain on his back——" began Leacock.

She cut him short, and broke her elastic as she jumped to ground. She dashed indoors for the telephone.

"At Smart's Farm", John heard her say when he ran down the staircase. "As quickly as you can please. I'm going back there right away."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

§ 1

THE dusk of early February had fallen on King's Parade. The man in the gown, his two bowler-hatted "bull dogs" at the halt behind him, lifted his cap before he asked, "Excuse me, sir. But are you a member of the University?"

John Carteret, having admitted this, gave his name and college. The proctor asked if he might be "introduced to the lady".

"Miss Nancy Pettigrew", said John—and the incident concluded with a reminder that caps and gowns must be worn immediately it was dark.

"Officious ass", muttered John.

They strolled on; came through Petty Cury into St. Andrew's Street and past Emmanuel. John continued to grumble; Nan to be amused.

"He must have thought I looked fast", thought Nan. "What fun!"

Aloud, as they turned into Park Terrace past the University Arms, she asked, "What happens if Elizabeth isn't at your rooms when we get there? Shall I have to wait on the doorstep?"

John, recovering his temper, answered, "We're not quite as mediæval as that".

Chatting inconsequently they reached his lodgings, and went upstairs to find Elizabeth and Dwight, who sprang apart—a trifle selfconsciously—as they entered.

"You two seem to have had quite a walk", said Dwight. "How soon ought we to be starting back for the Manor?"

"Not till we've had tea anyway." And Nan, having unpinned the hat which had aroused proctorial suspicions, walked to the mirror over the fireplace.

"I'm ever so much better-looking than she is", mused Nan. "But nobody comes all the way from America just to see me."

She smoothed her pale hair with a hand faintly reddened by the cold; dropped onto the sofa; crossed her legs, and took a cigarette from the pewter box on the low gate-legged table. John struck a match; held it while she lit up; rang for his landlady, and ordered tea.

"If you're coming over again", he said to Elizabeth, "you'd better let me know in advance and turn up for lunch."

Elizabeth explained, for the second time, that they hadn't really meant to come to Cambridge at all.

"It was my idea", confessed Nan; and stopped, thinking, "Elizabeth's so wrapped up in this Mansfield man she can't even see what's going on under her nose."

Tea came. She changed the subject, saying how much she had enjoyed her walk. John, passing the dish of crumpets with his usual clumsiness, said, "You must come up for May week. Pity Dwight's got to go back so soon".

Dwight said, "I'll be through college by the end of July". He exchanged glances with Elizabeth, wearing her ring that afternoon, though Charlotte had insisted on Nan's chaperonage when he suggested that he was quite capable of handling the car without a chauffeur.

Nan began humming, "We all go the same way home", and broke off to say, "Captain Whittinghame gave up his crutches for the first time yesterday".

Some undertone in her voice arrested John's attention.

"I suppose that means he'll be going back to London almost at once", he suggested.

Nan said, very casually, "I should think so. I expect he's rather sick of our part of the world—especially as he can't hunt".

Elizabeth put in, "You really ought to see the sketches he's done since he's been back at the Manor. They're simply lovely. Mother's going to have some of them framed"; and Dwight, "I think he's a perfectly grand fellow".

Nan smiled, her thin lips mock-mysterious.

"You're not the only one", she went on. "But of course you've only been in the house a couple of days."

John asked, sharply, "What's that meant to convey?"
"Oh, nothing."

Silence followed. Nan smiled again and asked for another cigarette. Elizabeth looked at her, eyes puzzled, full lips pursed. Then she said, also sharply, "You must have meant something, Nan. And I hate secrets".

"Well", said Nan after a pause, "don't you feel it's a little funny that Captain Whittinghame didn't go straight home as soon as he was well enough to be moved from Smart's Farm?" And she added without waiting for an answer, "Father thought he was springing it on me when he told me he'd decided to get married again. But of course I wasn't as blind as you two seem to be. I saw it coming months before it happened".

Another silence followed. A coal dropped from the grate. As John stooped to pick it up with the tongs, Elizabeth said, "I think you're talking rot. He's our cousin. And of course mother wouldn't let him go straight up to London from the farm. He wasn't nearly well enough".

Dwight said, "First cousins oughtn't to get married. A fellow who's taking medicine told me so".

"They're not first cousins." John turned on him. "So that doesn't enter into the argument."

John brooded for a moment. Nan could see, by the tightening of his jaw muscles, that she had displeased him.

"I agree with Elizabeth", he said at last. "You're talking absolute bilge. If mother ever does decide to get married again—and I don't see why she shouldn't—she's the best-looking woman I know by a long chalk—it won't be to a fellow like Whittinghame."

"All right. Have it your own way—both of you."

Nan walked to the mirror again.

She ran her kiss-curls through her fingers and applied her powder puff before she put on her hat. John thought—not for the first time since Christmas—that he would rather like to have a photograph of her, in a silver frame, for his mantel-board. Her appearance was certainly ornamental; and she danced beautifully. Actually, he'd never been able to enjoy dancing with any other girl.

"Yet I don't really like her", brooded John. "She's much

too sophisticated, much too grown up for her age. And she's always been far too catty."

All the same, Nan had never been a fool. He remembered that as, capped and gowned for early dinner in Hall, he escorted her down the staircase and back to the nearby garage where Dwight had left the car.

"I simply can't believe you're right", he said suddenly.

"Because you don't like him." She took his arm. "But why don't you like him? He's awfully handsome."

The hand on John's biceps tightened.

"You don't like him", persisted Nan.

"I wouldn't go as far as to say that. Though I admit I started by taking a spite to the fellow."

"You'd be against the marriage, though."

"Yes. If I thought it were going to happen. But I'm jolly sure it isn't."

Nan repeated her, "All right. Have it your own way". Dwight, just entering the garage, called over his shoulder, "I don't want to hustle you, Miss Pettigrew; but it's getting on for the half after six".

§ 2

Five minutes later John Carteret stood alone, watching the red rear light of his mother's car speeding between the street lamps for the mainroad.

The red light disappeared. He turned, made his way—walking a little more slowly than his habit—back along St. Andrew's Street, along Jesus Lane, under the archway and into the main court of St. Jude's.

Men were hurrying into Hall. One or two "old chaws", otherwise Harrovian freshers, gave him good evening. He answered absentmindedly; hung up his cap; passed into the high vaulted room; took his place at one of the long narrow tables; ordered himself—unusually—half a bottle of the best claret.

"Wish they hadn't turned up", he thought. "Wish Nan hadn't said anything. Don't believe it. Won't believe it."

He had planned to do three hours hard reading after Hall. But a man whose acquaintance he had just made at law

lecture suggested the theatre, and he accepted the casual suggestion, thinking, "Shan't be able to concentrate. Too worried".

The play proved some slight distraction ; but—his acquaintance accompanying him as far as Park Terrace—he said, "Come in and have a whiskey and soda, won't you ?"

And, that night, very unusually, he heard many bells chime before he slept.

§ 3

Elizabeth and her Dwight dropped Nan at her father's house, and only just reached the Manor in time for dinner.

"I agree with your brother", said Dwight as they ran up the terrace from the garage. "They're not a bit in love with each other."

But Elizabeth was not so sure ; and that night, after a game of auction which lasted longer than usual, she too found it difficult to sleep.

"I wouldn't mind mother marrying again", she thought. "Only I don't believe Cousin Rupert would make her happy."

By the morning, however—with only forty-eight hours of Dwight's company left to enjoy—her own romance obscured all other considerations. Selfish as only youth in love can be selfish, she said to herself, "I can't see that it's any of my business. I shall be living in Philadelphia by this time next year".

That morning Charlotte left the breakfast table before Rupert had hobbled down the stairs ; and returned to it, fully equipped for the chase, while he was still sitting over his *Morning Post*.

"Fifteen miles to hack", she laughed. "I think I shall have to follow our worthy master's example and motor to my meets next season."

"If there is a next season—with all this trouble going on in Ireland", laughed back Rupert. "Old man Carson's well on his high horse this morning, and I'd never trust Churchill not to let his guns off."

"Can't you ever be serious ?"

"Not about politics."

They chatted a minute or so longer. He complimented her

on a new habit she was wearing. She flashed back at him, "How like you to notice it"; and drew on her gloves.

"What's happened to her lately?" Rupert asked himself as he picked up his sticks and hobbled after her onto the terrace. But, watching Leacock mount her, it seemed to him that the question hardly needed an answer. So nearly was he sure.

She turned in her saddle and lifted her whip to him before she disappeared. Thoughtful, he sent one of the footmen for the special paper and the sketching board he had asked her to buy him in Laxford. Soon, seated on a campstool in the old moat, he was at work.

He could always think better while he worked. Co-ordination of hand and eye came naturally to him. Rock garden, lichen wall, light and shadow under the span of the bridge, took shape of their own volition.

One day—if he played his cards properly—these things might be as good as his!

The thought thrilled—but seemed rather caddish. A chap shouldn't marry for money.

But could he help it if he had fallen in love with a woman who happened to have a lot of money? Charlotte was a damn fine woman. And this place didn't, of course, belong to her. It belonged to John.

Query—could he get on with John? Rather awkward—to marry the mother and not hit it off with her eldest son.

Footsteps disturbed him. He looked up to see Elizabeth and Dwight crossing the bridge; called up to them, "Hallo, where are you off to?"

Elizabeth called down, "Only as far as the Fort".

They disappeared. He resumed work for a moment. More footsteps. Behind him this time. He looked round to observe Laura Marston.

"May I see?" she asked, approaching.

"What there is of it."

He smiled at her, conscious that his face was completely healed, realising that her approval of his work would not be altogether impersonal.

"Likes me", he thought. "Women usually do. That Nan came up to the farm nearly every day. Could have had a nice

little flirtation with her. Haven't started kidnapping yet, though. Suppose I shall before I'm finished. Can't do without a love affair."

Laura, as he had anticipated, said, "But you've done quite a lot. I'm sure it's going to be one of your best. I can't understand how you do them so quickly". She inquired after his health, and—this also anticipated—told him that he must on no account forget his midday Bovril.

She passed on round the moat.

Alone again, he wondered what would happen to Laura when Elizabeth married; pitied—and forgot her in the same moment. Academically the fate of governesses surplus to establishments might be tragic. But a fellow's first duty was to number one.

"Pity I didn't wake up to that sooner", thought Rupert. "Always been too romantic. Got myself into some nasty messes. Don't want to get myself into any more."

On which, characteristically, he relapsed into a mood of the purest romanticism, telling himself, "Charlotte's still a comparatively young woman, and she's got a great deal too much responsibility. She really needs a man of the world to take care of her".

Chivalry—that was his role. Especially if she had fallen in love with him. And of course she had.

§ 4

Pencil still busy, Rupert cast his mind back over the last five weeks—from that moment when he had recovered consciousness to find Charlotte sitting at his bedside until now. With various little happenings surveyed thus in retrospect, the question he had asked himself on the terrace became superfluous. A man of his experience could always tell whether a woman cared for him.

But Charlotte wasn't the kind who made the running. If he really wanted her, he'd have to do that. And quickly. Because he really couldn't stay on at the Manor much longer otherwise. Country people gossiped so.

Devilish unfair. He'd never even asked her to kiss him.

Still, one had to legislate for gossip. And one had to consider John, Philip, Elizabeth. They were of an age to think it a bit queer if one didn't pack one's traps pretty soon. The nipper—thank goodness—was too young.

"Ripping little nipper", thought Rupert, putting the final touches to his sketch. "Wants good hands on his bridle, though. Otherwise he'll get into the same sort of messes I've always been in. Funny he's so crazy to be a soldier. Funny what a flick he's got with a pencil."

As he made his slow way up the steps and towards the house, he had a sudden vision of Maurice, in cap and riding breeches, coming across the bedroom at Smart's Farm, standing by him, staring down at him before he said :

"I didn't think I'd be allowed to see you. The mater doesn't know I've come, so please don't say anything about it. But I just had to find out for myself if you were really all right. People tell one such awful lies about people who are ill. Especially when one isn't very old".

"Wind's all right in that quarter", mused Rupert over luncheon.

But four o'clock found him as undecided as Charlotte, dismounting to give Patricia a breather after the run of the year.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

§ 1

It had been—Charlotte reckoned—an eleven-mile point, sixteen as hounds ran; and only a handful of them in at the death. Among these, to her surprise, was Nan.

Bridle over arm, she went to congratulate Nan, still mounted on that hot chestnut of her stepmother's.

"Nothing to do with me", laughed the girl. "I wanted to pull out, but I couldn't stop him. Oh dear, I am blown. I feel as if I hadn't got a breath left in my body. And the last I saw of father was when I jumped over him."

The master joined them to inquire if Nan would care to have the mask.

She dimpled at him and said, "Rather". A man Charlotte had never seen before—tall, with waxed points to his dark moustache—lounged over, whip trailing, hat on the back of his head; and was introduced as "Major Rackstraw".

"Jolly good hunt", said he. "How about a lift home in my car, Miss Pettigrew? My fellow'll bring your horse on."

"That would be perfectly heavenly."

Again Nan dimpled. Major Rackstraw signalled to his groom. She slid from her saddle.

"And how's the invalid?" she asked. "Will he be out again soon—or is he deserting your hospitable roof for the gaieties of London?"

"Casualty?" put in Rackstraw.

"Yes." Nan had not waited for Charlotte's answer. "Poor Captain Whittinghame. He took a most dreadful toss, and Lady Carteret's been looking after him."

"Whittinghame." To Charlotte's heightened imagination, there was a touch of doubt in the way Rackstraw repeated the

name. "Is he a chap who used to be in the D.G.'s? Lanky sort of bloke with curly gold hair?"

"Why? Do you know him?"

"I believe I did meet him once, playing polo."

Their talk came to a full stop. Charlotte intervened to say that Rupert was "nearly well again". The groom took the chestnut—Nan and Rackstraw said goodbye and went off to his car. Hounds followed huntsman on to the turnpike. Joan Maythorn, the only other woman who had been up—a long-spurred, weather-beaten thruster, whom Charlotte had known ever since her first season—called over, "Care for a drink, my dear?" and held up her flask.

Mrs. Maythorn's whiskey and water rasped Charlotte's throat; but she felt grateful for the unaccustomed stimulant as she remounted and set off solitary for home.

That cheeky Nan! That supercilious friend of hers! As though one didn't realise what both of them had been driving at?

"I'm not a fool", thought Charlotte, lengthening her iron for comfort. "Even if I am in love."

This was not the first time she had faced the fact of being in love. She had been doing so—off and on—ever since she had ordered out the car and been driven back to Smart's Farm; ever since she had waited there, in an agony of suspense, till Doctor Heythrop's, "He's broken a couple of ribs and his left ankle, but we'll soon have him in the saddle again", sent her back, thoroughly ashamed of herself for the storm of emotion, to a late dinner at the Manor.

But this was the first time she had looked beyond the mere fact to its possible consequences; the very first time she had dared to ask herself, "Can I marry a man about whom other men, lifting their eyebrows, say, 'Is he the chap who used to be in the D.G.'s'?"

For Rackstraw—she felt confident—*had* just lifted his eyebrows when he repeated Rupert's name. The touch of doubt, the undertone of surprise (as though he were saying, "What—that fellow!") had not been altogether imagined.

It would take a good many years before Rupert lived down his reputation. Even if he had reformed.

But—*had* Rupert reformed? Did men's characters change after maturity? Could she trust him? And could she trust herself?

"Balance", she thought. "Proportion. Even when one loves people. He hasn't got it. Especially when he loves people." And, suddenly, she caught herself thinking, "Like Maurice"; suddenly, just for the split of a second, she was conscious of that very first, that most supremely ridiculous fear.

Patricia, pointing a toe, half-stumbled. The rap of the pommel against Charlotte's knee disrupted thought. By the time she had recovered her seat, even the recollection of that fear had vanished.

Suspicion of Rupert's apparent reformation, however, remained. Marrying him, she might be headed for unhappiness. Besides, there were other happinesses to be considered? Becoming a wife, she would still remain a mother.

But were the mother satisfactions enough?

The question struck her as indecent, but remained inescapable. Her love for Rupert was not—why funk the big leap?—a young girl's craving for romance. She did not hanker after romance. She wanted the flesh and blood reality—the thing her children could not give her. Even John.

Passionately, she wrenched thought back to John—to that moment in the Long Gallery when he had slipped an arm round her waist, when he had held her to him almost as lover.

Dear John! So like his father. And she had loved John's father, as a wife should love her husband, giving herself to him soberly, trusting him, respecting him . . .

Or was that just hypocrisy, lip service to the dead?

Dusk closed in, and depression caught at the pit of her stomach, as she reached that point in her meditations. She tried to laugh away depression; but her sense of humour seemed to have deserted her—and the effort failed.

Lip service to the dead.

Granted some love for her husband, had the love ever been complete? Could she ever have said, as that young girl on the ship, "Does he really expect I'd go without you, darling?" Could she ever have stood, as that elder woman, hand in hand

with her husband, facing certain death rather than life apart from him?

Maybe for duty. But never out of sheer devotion. So why make believe?

Wasn't she old enough, intelligent enough, well-balanced enough to have done with make-believe? Wasn't she sufficiently modern to admit that passion had never been a merely masculine prerogative, and that to be "shocked" by any process of one's mind was a proof of that mind's inferiority, of its slavishness to the Victorian shibboleths.

"Very nearly modern enough", she decided. "But not quite."

For somehow the certainty—and by then it was certainty—that nearly all her new feelings for Rupert were physical feelings (and therefore not new at all) was a smirching one.

Yet could she resist those feelings? Could she bear it if he just "deserted her hospitable roof for the gaieties of London"?

As he so easily might!

§ 2

By the time Charlotte was halfway up King's Oak Hill, Patricia began to show signs of exhaustion. She pulled up; dismounted; and loosened girth.

Latterly she had taken to smoking. There were Sullivans and matches in her sandwich case. The smoke did something to dispel her own fatigue; but—walking now—she was again conscious of depression.

Supposing Rupert just went back to town?

"Better", she thought. "I've no right to marry him."

Yet why?

Rupert might, in his own phrase, have blotted his copybook. But eventually people forgot even the worst scandals. And Rupert had never been really vicious, only a fool.

Besides—didn't at least some of his follies lie at her own door?

Her common sense answered that question with a forthright, "No". The fact that her immature girlhood had thrown Rupert over for John was no excuse for him; must not be allowed to influence her present behaviour.

Although, once upon a time, it had !

That thought, too, seemed smirching. She put memories away. Yet something of their sharp, sweet fragrance remained at the back of her mind. To love again, neither trustfully, nor soberly, nor respectfully, but just for the sake of loving . . . and of being loved.

The forgotten cigarette scorched her string glove. Angrily she flung it away.

"Crazy", she thought ; and, with the first touch of returning humour, "*L'âge dangereux*. That's your main trouble."

So thinking, she made the oak, and halted for a moment—her own breath, the mare's breath, steaming to a touch of frost in the air.

The mist which had come up with late afternoon must be blowing away. Through the leafless branches, she could see a few stars shining. Below and ahead, a dog barked—Negus perhaps, or Spot.

She walked on again, under the arms of the signpost, over the brow of the hill. That first twinkle of light in the valley was the lodge. Beyond, the windows of the Manor gleamed a vague red welcome.

Her home. Happier, less lonely, since Rupert had come to it. These feelings, therefore, couldn't be solely . . . physical. She needed a man of her own age for companion, to lean on, to consult when in difficulty, even to laugh with.

And her children ? Surely they needed a man of the world's guidance ? George was such an old fogey. Herbert so wrapped up in his own affairs. Fancy George or Herbert trying to advise Maurice.

Rupert really liked Maurice. And the boy would do anything for him. That might be allowed to influence, to soften, one's judgment. That did influence, did soften, one's judgment. So did Elizabeth's almost inevitable marriage.

Philip, also, liked Rupert.

"The only one who might really disapprove", decided Charlotte in a sudden flash of illumination, "would be John."

By then she was within hail of the lodge—and resolute not to walk a yard farther. Matthews, nearing eighty and stone deaf, had not heard her call. But his half-witted nephew

came to the open gates and helped Charlotte to remount; the rested mare broke into a trot as they took the short cut to the stables; Leacock was waiting for her when she rode into the courtyard—and, while she was still giving her instructions to Leacock, the sight of Rupert drove all ratiocinations away.

§ 3

Rupert, muffled in a big coat, had discarded one of his sticks. He stood by, in the warm stable, while the mare drank, while she snuffled at her manger, with the helper starting to wisp her down.

"Got a little nervous", he confessed as they made their way back to the house. "Thought you might have met another fool in a racing car. Tired?"

"I am a bit weary. Walking in top boots is an overrated amusement."

"Take my arm?"

"That would be a help!"

"Correct. But I shan't be a cripple very much longer. Heythrop was over this afternoon. He's pretty sure I'll be able to ride in another fortnight."

"Isn't that good?"

They reached the house without more words. Huge logs crackled under the groined fireplace in the hall. She unpinned her veil, took off her hat; laid it with whip and gloves on one of the side-tables; sank into a chair.

"I've shaken a cocktail for you", said Rupert. "Stay where you are and I'll fetch it. Cigarette?"

"Thanks."

He took his case from his hip pocket, struck a match for her, and went off to the morning room. As he opened the door, she heard Elizabeth and Dwight laughing together. Kate came down the staircase, approached, knelt to unstrap the long spur.

"You're looking rather tired, m'lady", said Kate.

"I'll be all right as soon as I've had a bath. Get it ready at once, please."

The maid, having retrieved Charlotte's hat and gloves, went

back up the staircase. Rupert reappeared, skilfully carrying two glasses.

Sipping, Charlotte could still hear the voices of Dwight and Elizabeth.

"Chatter of the love birds", said Rupert, raising his own glass. "Well, here's to 'em. We were all like that once—and very nice too. Pity one can't have the good times all over again.

"Do you ever think that?" he went on.

Her heart dropped no beat. Her hands, the right holding the drink he had brought her, the left stubbing out the cigarette he had given her, were entirely steady.

"Wasn't there a famous occasion", she asked, "when James Pigg threatened to take hounds home if Mr. Jorrock's wouldn't cast forrard?"

He wrinkled his eyes at her; then he said, very slowly, "I've forgotten my Surtees. But—is that a threat or a promise?"

"Let's call it a warning."

She rose as she spoke. He followed her to the foot of the staircase.

"As my lady wishes", he grinned. "But if the little boy behaves himself properly, may he stay till his leg's quite better?"

"If he's not hankering for the gaieties of London", said Charlotte—and could have kicked herself for the saying as she wrestled with her stubborn boots.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

§ I

"I'm so glad you've come, John", said Elizabeth as the train from Cambridge puffed away out of Laxford Junction.

"For any particular reason?"

"No." Travers had just picked up John's suitcase; Elizabeth glanced meaningly at his back. "Just because it's the Hunt Ball."

They followed on; passed the ticket collector; climbed into the car.

"And now let's have the truth", ordered John. "That letter of yours was so cryptic I couldn't make head or tail of it."

"Well, you see——" began Elizabeth.

"Yes", prompted her brother, pulling out one of the pipes Rupert had given him.

"I'm—I'm afraid Nan was right."

John filled his pipe, and lit up without asking her permission. For a minute or so, he smoked in silence.

"But you're not sure?" he suggested.

"No. And it seems so beastly to discuss them. I mean—mother didn't interfere when I fell in love. She's been perfectly ripping about Dwight."

Elizabeth's letter had been unexpected. But her suspicions were no shock. They only confirmed what John's own imagination had been foreshadowing ever since he had heard from Charlotte that Rupert would be staying on at the Manor until after the ball.

"How much do you actually know?" he went on.

"Only that she's different."

"In what way?"

"It's difficult to tell you." Elizabeth's lips pursed. Her

eyes grew sombre. "I don't suppose a man would notice it. Dwight didn't. But that was nearly a month ago. It's happened since then."

"What's happened?"

"The change in her. Somehow she seems ever so much younger. And then there's the way she looks at him—when she thinks he isn't noticing."

"You don't think they're on kissing terms then?"

The sheer youth of the question made Elizabeth laugh. Suddenly she felt years older, years wiser than John.

"You are funny", she said. "Do you really think mother's like Nan?"

He scowled at that ; and fell silent again. They were making good time over the dry road. Another quarter of an hour—and they would be at the Manor. She put a hand on his arm as she asked :

"Do you think it would matter very much? I don't see why it should. And I don't see that anything you or I could do would stop it".

"That's true." His hand covered hers in a rare gesture of brotherly affection. "We can't do anything. But I should simply loathe it to happen. Wouldn't you?"

She thought that over.

"No", she said at last. "I don't feel as strongly as that. I can't help liking Rupert. He's so cheerful."

"Bounders always are."

"And I'm sure she'd be happier if she married again."

John thought that over.

"Possibly", he admitted. "If she married the right man."

His sense of justice pulled him up with a round turn.

"Of course", he went on, "there are bounders and bounders. I can't help liking him myself—in a way. And I've always had an idea—in fact I told her so when she came to see me and Philip at Harrow after father died—that mother would marry again. But I simply can't see her being happy married to Rupert. So let's hope you're wrong . . . By the way, you haven't discussed this with anyone except Dwight? Nan for instance?"

"Rather not."

"Then don't. There's a dear."

"Of course I won't."

The Manor lay below them. They left it at that.

§ 2

It was still broad daylight when John and Elizabeth entered the Gallery to find their mother at the tea table and Rupert, in jodhpurs, handing plates to Laura, Doctor Heythrop and the doctor's rabbit-toothed wife.

John kissed Charlotte. Rupert said, "Hallo, there. Your train must have come in on time. What about a muffin?"

John said, "Thanks. So you're all right again?"

Heythrop, not without his sense of humour, put in, "Oh, we provincial medicos aren't quite as black as we're painted".

Charlotte laughed, "And since when are these the provinces?"

Heythrop apologised, "I'm sorry, Lady Carteret. But is there an adjective for Shires?" Rupert misquoted, "Here we deem the swell provincial lower than the Melton muff". On which Mrs. Heythrop remarked that she always felt a little out of her depth when it came to Browning—and Elizabeth nearly disgraced herself by spluttering into her tea.

Presently the vicar drifted in; and was followed by Mrs. Marradine, full of the latest news about the movement.

"And it wasn't Mr. Asquith after all", said she. "It was poor Lord Weardale. I do hope she hasn't hurt him. Dog whips, indeed. What will these silly militants be up to next?"

"Max Beerbohm calls them——" began Rupert. But a glance from Charlotte set him handing the muffins again; and it was only behind his hand that he could conclude to John—"He calls them the unenjoyed, old chap. Rather good. What?"

Despite himself, John chuckled. The next moment, however—considering that interchange of glances—he felt himself growing angry. And, continuing watchful, he grew more and more certain that Elizabeth must be right.

His mother *had* changed. There *was* something about the way she looked at Rupert. But what the blazes could one do

about it? One couldn't ask her point-blank, "Are you in love with the chap? Do you mean to marry him?"

After all, she had a perfect right to marry again if she wanted to. And Rupert might make her happy. There was nothing really against the chap—as far as one knew.

The telephone rang just as John reached that point in his deliberations. One of the footmen came in to say he was wanted. Going out to the instrument, he heard Nan.

"Elizabeth told me you'd be at the ball", said she. "I've kept you two waltzes and a two-step. But you might have written. I'm being very popular these days."

She gave him her news in a few inconsequent sentences. He asked after her father and stepmother.

"Gladys *va en aveir*", she told him.

"I don't quite understand."

"Don't you? It's quite simple. Anyway—I shall be riding her horses for the rest of the season."

John said, "Oh!" Nan said, "Father's strutting about like a turkeycock"—and, abruptly, "How's the wind with you in that quarter?"

"Don't be a fool", John snapped at her.

He rang off and went back to the Gallery. The Heythrops were just making their adieux. Presently Mrs. Marradine asked for her dog cart to be brought round; the vicar pedalled down the drive on his new Raleigh—and Rupert said, "If I don't go and write out my bookie his cheque I shall be posted".

He lounged out. Simeon and his satellites cleared away the tea.

"There are one or two things I ought to do to my frock", said Elizabeth. "It really isn't quite right yet."

"Can I help, dear?" asked Laura.

"I wish you would, Lollie."

The door closed behind them, leaving mother and eldest son alone.

"Now come and sit down and tell me all about Cambridge", said Charlotte. "Have you spoken at the Union yet?"

"Only to ask a question. And I made an awful mess of it. I'm sure I'll never be able to speak properly."

"Your father never could. That was one reason why he never stood for parliament. How's the work going?"

"Oh, that's all right. Though it's rather like it used to be at Harrow. I have to do a lot more mugging up than most chaps."

He broke off; stared into the fire; rose and shifted a log with his foot, thinking, "If I were a bit older I'd tackle her about the whole thing".

Watching him, she thought, "If he were older, I might ask his advice. But what's the use of asking anybody's advice? What's the good of jumping fences before one comes to them? Rupert hasn't said anything. Perhaps he never will say anything".

Well—even if he didn't—she would always have her John.

§ 3

Meanwhile Captain Rupert Whittinghame, D.S.O., was perpending his bank balance—still further attenuated by "that damn fellow Ladbroke's cheque".

"Marvellous—the way I seem to get rid of the spondulicks", he brooded. But that this could in any way soften his feelings for, or influence his conduct towards his hostess he refused to admit.

On the contrary. If he'd had a reasonable amount of money, he'd have proposed to Charlotte the best part of a month ago. He was in love with her. No getting away from that.

She was in love with him, too. No getting away from that either. So why hadn't he taken the bull by the horns?

"Too much of a gentleman?" he asked himself; and, answering the question in the affirmative, felt all aglow with conscious virtue. Nevertheless, as a gentleman, oughtn't he to consider Charlotte first?

Mightn't it be his duty to marry Charlotte? A woman with a great place like this on her hands really needed someone to look after her. And what was the use of a young fellow like John?

"Bit of an ass, that lad", continued Rupert's brooding. "Slow in the uptake. Didn't do much good at Harrow.

Won't do much good at the Varsity. Twist him round my little finger if I try hard enough. Needn't worry about the rest of the litter. Like 'em. Especially Maurice."

There was a photograph of Maurice, in riding kit, on the little table by the door at which he had sat down to write his cheque. He looked at the photograph for a while; took it in his hands.

"Sort of nipper I ought to have had", he thought. "Been a better man if I'd ever found the right girl."

But, damn it all, he had found the right girl. First go off, too. Only—she'd thrown him over. He'd never really loved anybody in the same way he'd loved Charlotte. And he never would.

Resolute about this—and in his most romantic mood—he replaced the photograph; stuffed his cheque book into a side pocket of his riding jacket; carried his letter into the hall, and left it, with a penny, for Simeon to post.

The big house seemed unusually quiet, unusually sombre. A sudden fit of depression assailed him as he made his way up to his bedroom. He would never be able to live all the year round in this place. It gave him the jim-jams. If he married Charlotte they would have to be in London pretty often.

And why the blazes hadn't he got a red dress coat?

One of the maids knocked, and brought in his shaving water. Still irritated at the thought that he would have to appear at a hunt ball in ordinary black tails, he undressed; stropped his razor; heated his tongs over the lamp chimney, and curled his moustache.

"Getting to look my age", he decided, inspecting himself carefully in the big looking-glass. "That toss! Not as tough as I used to be."

Memories of South Africa flitted through his mind. Man's life—that. Pity this European scrap people were always gassing about didn't come off. Shake 'em up. Do 'em good. Especially some of the youngsters.

"Not the sort of lads we were", decided Rupert. "No go in 'em. No guts. Run a mile if they heard a pompom go off."

And again—tying his tie, tightening the strap of his white waistcoat—he experienced that glow of conscious virtue which is the prerogative of his kind.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

§ I

CHARLOTTE heard Rupert go past her bedroom door while Kate was still putting the last touches to her hair ; and her mind gave her many pictures of him—till the entrance of Elizabeth drove them away.

Her daughter—she thought—was almost *en beauté*. It seemed impossible that the dumpy schoolgirl of two years back should appear so presentable ; should have such a good figure, such a clear complexion, such white hands.

She said as much ; and the girl, preening herself at the long mirror, laughed :

“I didn’t think I was looking quite as plain as usual. It’s the colour of this frock, I suppose. Blue always suits me”.

She re-arranged a nut-brown curl, and shook out a fold of her long skirt.

“But what about you ?” she continued. “*And* all the family diamonds out, I see. Do let me help you to put them on. I simply love jewellery.”

She took the necklace which Kate had been holding ; tried it round her own neck, before she came behind Charlotte and snapped home the bayonet of the clasp.

“Nobody who didn’t know would ever take you for my mother”, she went on. “You haven’t got a single gray hair—or a wrinkle.”

“Flatterer”, laughed Charlotte ; but tonight, as never, flattery pleased her ; weakened her ; making her feel almost the sentimentalist.

“After all”, she caught herself thinking, “Elizabeth’s got her Dwight.”

This secret comparison—almost a secret jealousy—did not strike her as at all extraordinary. She even elaborated it—

telling herself that she had just as much right to happiness as her daughter—while they made their way downstairs.

But Rupert's, "My word, you look positively irresistible", brought on an attack of selfconsciousness, whose only cure was a snub.

"Never believe anything your cousin says", she smiled at John, also staring at the splendour of the new black and silver frock and the diamonds, "he's so terribly insincere."

The gong boomed before Rupert could think of a retort. But she could see that she had stung his complacency; and, with the champagne being poured, he broke off from telling Laura, "You really oughtn't to be staying at home—we could easily have squeezed you into the car", to say:

"If there's one adjective that doesn't apply to me, it's insincere. I don't believe in kidding other people—and I don't believe in kidding myself. Life's too short for that kind of thing".

"My dear", said Charlotte, "you've been kidding yourself, as you call it, ever since I've known you."

John smiled. Rupert, stung again, frowned; then, recovering himself, he said to John:

"There are two qualities I've always admired about your mother—one of them's her memory".

"And the other?" asked John.

"Her courage."

His eyes clashed with Charlotte's. Hers were the first to fall.

§ 2

In those few seconds before she lifted her eyes again, Charlotte was swayed by a dozen separate emotions—but mainly by anger at her own folly.

This time, it was she who had cast back—only to give Rupert his opening for a rebuke. And what a harsh rebuke. What a reminder of all that were best forgotten—that must be forgotten.

In front of her children, too.

How dare he!

Yet didn't his very daring prove him the prey of parallel

emotions ? Could she have stung him to that pitch if he didn't care ?

Moderately calm once more—yet strangely thrilled, curiously aware that they had crossed some Rubicon—she set herself to observe him. For the moment, he was juggling the ball of conversation between John and Elizabeth—drawing them out of themselves, making even John talkative.

"Clever", she mused. "Distracting their attention. Giving me a chance to recover myself."

And from that—mindful of a book she had just read, and thought rather fantastic, almost too modern—she fell to wondering how far the author's theory, that there was something of each sex in the other, applied to Rupert and herself.

Rupert—she felt—would be horrified to think of himself as anything except "hundred per cent male". Yet there was another side, definitely feminine, to his nature. Just as there was a masculine side to her own.

"He's softer than I am in some ways", she thought. "Harder in others. And of course he's never quite honest with himself. I told him the truth there. That's what made him so angry."

Rupert's angers, however—unlike her own—were always short-lived ; and his character far more malleable. If only she had married him when they were both young !

Still pensive, she was aware of Simeon at her elbow.

"Shall I serve coffee in here, m'lady ?" asked Simeon.

"Please."

The innovation—originally suggested by Rupert—gave her the opportunity for a cigarette. She saw John's eyebrows go up as one of the footmen passed her the silver box, and could not refrain from saying, "I hope you don't disapprove".

John laughed, "Of course not. Nan smokes, so why shouldn't you ?" But when Laura followed her example, his eyes nearly popped out of his head.

"I'm surprised at you, Lollie", he continued, with one of his rare flashes of humour. "I've heard you say over and over again that smoking is unladylike."

"For *young* ladies", bridled Laura, looking at Elizabeth, "it is."

Rupert began to dispute with Laura, and tried to force a Sullivan on Elizabeth, who shook her head, saying, "They only make me cough". Simeon, handing round the coffee, said the car was at the door.

Charlotte, Elizabeth and Laura rose almost at once. Rupert finished his third glass of champagne, and swigged off a brandy before he and John followed them into the hall.

Laura, turning back into the house as the car started, could not help thinking how short life was, and how soon the dead were forgotten.

"Only two years next month", she thought. "But I suppose it's all for the best. She's too young to remain a widow."

What luck, though, some women had.

§ 3

Curiously enough Charlotte—as the car passed her open lodge gates—was also thinking about her husband. But to her, looking back on them, these two years since John's death seemed inordinately long. She found that her memory could hardly bridge the gap between the last hunt ball they had attended together and this forthcoming one.

Far closer than all her recollections of John seemed her youthful recollections of Rupert, sitting unusually silent beside her.

"The dangerous age", thought repeated—but in vain.

For once in her life, she would let herself be the complete romantic. Since after all—and whatever the outcome of it—she was in love.

"Forget everything except that", said a sudden temptation. "Let yourself go. Enjoy yourself. Be young."

Rupert began to talk. He doubted if he would be able to "hop clean through the programme". His ankle was "still a bit dicky". Would Elizabeth mind "sitting out a couple" with him? What about the supper dance? Could he have that with Charlotte?

"If you promise to stay sober", she said.

He rebuked her again, "With all my faults, have you ever

known me to exceed the limit in the presence of ladies?" But the implication behind that rebuke passed her by. Neither did she notice the look John threw at Elizabeth. For the moment, her mind relegated her two children to an imaginary nursery.

"Never", she admitted; and talked on, gaily, inconsequently, till they made Laxford and drew up outside the Assembly Rooms. Neither did she experience any self-consciousness as she and Elizabeth went to take off their furs.

That feeling only came to her later—and even then only for a moment in the thought, "I wonder what some of the cats and kittens'll have to say if I do marry him"—as Rupert put his arm round her waist and swung her into a waltz.

It was twenty years since their last dance together. She had even forgotten the occasion. But their steps matched, as always; and with her next partner—Colonel Pettigrew—she was conscious of the difference; of dancing for duty rather than enjoyment.

Much in the same way as she had been wont to dance with her husband, John.

The colonel, when she had done her duty, insisted on leading her to a chair; dumped her down, and plunged into gynæcology. He had insisted that his Gladys must stay at home. Hot rooms and late nights were the worst possible things for a girl in his Gladys' condition. He felt sure Charlotte would agree with him. Heythrop did. On the whole, he had decided to trust his Gladys to Heythrop. Unless, of course, there were any complications. But didn't Charlotte think it would be a sound scheme to get some "Harley Street feller" just to look her over"? After all, one never knew. Gladys was rather delicate.

"Strong as a horse", thought Charlotte; but managed to say the correct thing.

§ 4

Except for one more dance with Rupert, Charlotte had been doing her duty and saying the correct things for more than an hour. Others were young. Others could enjoy themselves. But not she!

Standing in the doorway, where her last partner—the some-

what overwhelming Rackstraw—had just left her, she let her eyes range the room, decorated as it had been decorated for the last twenty years, lit as it had been lit for the last twenty years. And peopled with so many people she had known for the last twenty years. Mostly bores !

Here came another bore—General Frobisher, all uprightness, all the Service in his red coat with the yellow facings. Would she honour him by being his partner for this set of lancers ?

So sorry—smiled Charlotte—but she was feeling just a little tired.

“Then how about a little drop of wine ?” suggested the general ; and offered his arm.

They made their way against the stream of returning dancers, down a long passage, to the buffet. She seated herself, playing with her ostrich-feather fan.

“I’ve just been having a word with that son of yours”, said the general, returning with two glasses of champagne. “How time does go to be sure. Why—it seems only yesterday that I saw him blooded.”

The tactless old ass—as though any woman liked being reminded of her age !

“Your daughter’s here, too, I see”, he went on ; and asked whether Elizabeth had been presented. Charlotte said, “Not yet. And she doesn’t want to come out this summer. She doesn’t care for London very much”. But her thoughts were on the floor.

Music had begun. She wanted to be dancing—a trifle riotously—on that floor. She didn’t want to be “a matron”, discussing her family with sexagenarians. What had happened to Rupert ? The last time she’d seen him, he’d been with Nan.

Sipping her champagne while the general droned on, her mind conceived a sudden jealousy—not particularly of Nan, but of all the Nans, of all the young, the inconsequent, the frivolous.

“Let’s go and watch them”, she said abruptly ; and put down her glass.

They walked back along the passage. Through the half-open door of a little room she had a glimpse of a man’s figure and a girl’s—just sprung apart at the sound of footsteps. Or so at least one imagined.

Curse one's imagination. Curse this sudden jealousy of youth.

They came back to the doorway. She looked for Rupert. There he was—with Elizabeth for partner—swinging her off her feet as though he were still at Cambridge.

"The young folks seem to be enjoying themselves", commented the general. "It's just as well we're out of the scrimmage."

She could have murdered him without compunction; but her lips held their set smile.

The kitchen lancers grew more and more boisterous. Lines of men, lines of girls, arms linked and faces flushed, charged up and down the floor to hunting hollas. The idiots! But how she envied them. Why hadn't her own youth been like that?

She had a vision—as the music beat to its last bar—of her own youth, of the staid courtship, of the resented honeymoon, of those first three hunting seasons spent like Gladys Pettigrew would have to spend what little remained of this one. And suddenly—as Rupert and Elizabeth came up to her—the diamonds seemed too heavy on her neck and at her wrists.

"Only two more before supper", said Elizabeth; and, looking at her programme, "I can't make out who I'm going down with. It looks like Li Hung Chang. But I know he's got red hair and a Beaufort coat on."

"Well, mind you're faithful to Dwight", chaffed Rupert. "These red-headed blokes are always dangerous. Who the deuce am I tripping the next one with? Green frock and a purple sash. Golly! Wonder if she's worth a spot of kala juggah. Collected a nice hack on the wrong ankle, I did."

The general made his excuses and drifted off. Elizabeth turned her back on them. Rupert stooped to feel his ankle. The master claimed Charlotte. Over his shoulder, she saw Nan waltzing with John.

Could that cheeky Nan—apparently suspicious of her relations with Rupert—have dropped some hint to John? Both of them seemed to be looking at her.

How utterly idiotic.

How too absurd.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

§ 1

THE nameless girl of the green frock and the purple sash did not show up in the doorway. "For which relief", decided Rupert after the band had been playing for three minutes, "much thanks."

He retreated along the passage to the cloakroom; took off his left shoe and sock; watered the bandage round his ankle; changed his collar and lit himself a cigarette, before he strolled back.

Charlotte was still dancing with "old Bugglesworth". She smiled at him over her shoulder as they swung by. Smiling back at her, he thought, "Best-looking woman in the room. None of 'em can hold a candle to her. Don't see why I should dwell on it. Shan't dwell on it".

Why the deuce had he hesitated so long? Because of her money? But could he help it if he happened to be in love with a woman who had a lot of money? Because she had four children? But what the dickens did he care about the children? It was her he wanted. Her. The very first girl he'd ever fallen in love with. The grandest woman—and that was saying a good deal, too—in the whole of this crowd.

With that, his last hesitation seemed to disappear.

Smiling at her again, romance overwhelmed him, and he was conscious of the most wonderful resolutions. No more running into debt. No more thick nights. No more little ladies from the chorus. Not even another Millicent!

A pity, perhaps, that Charlotte should be ten years older than Millicent. And she might not be quite as easy to manage. A will of her own, had Charlotte. Still, a grand woman. And a fellow couldn't have everything. None of 'em were perfect. Come to think of that, he wasn't so perfect himself.

"Can be, though", he decided. "Only got to make up my mind. Wonderful thing, love. Changes a chap. Tell her so when I propose to her."

He retreated again, to the buffet that time, thinking, "A spot of jumping powder won't do me any harm".

§ 2

The master thanked Charlotte for his dance ; and deposited her on a chair next to Mrs. Marradine, who complimented her on her frock.

"London of course", said the local leader of the movement ; and talked clothes for a few moments. Again making duty conversation, Charlotte's thoughts reverted to Nan and John.

Idiotic, absurd as it might seem, she could not rid herself of the idea that those two had been discussing her, that Nan must have dropped some hint to John. And, haunted by this idea, she grew aware—for the first time—of a peculiar hostility towards "that chit of a girl".

"Bad type", she caught herself thinking. "Hard. Selfish. A regular little mischief-maker." And the violence of that thought surprised her. Because it was so rarely she could bring herself to sit in harsh judgment on her own sex.

"What's the matter with me tonight?" she wondered. But the sight of that tall figure under the bunting by the doorway drove all introspection from her mind.

Instinctively—while she still watched Rupert draw the room with his eyes—she knew that he was looking for her. Intuitively—as he lounged across the empty floor—she sensed a crisis in their relationship. But there was no pleasure in that sensation—only a twinge of fear.

Suddenly—as Rupert drew up that chair—she was all fear. Suddenly she could feel her toes curling in both shoes, and her hands wanting to shake.

She could barely keep her voice steady when she answered his casual, "Dancing the next with anyone, Charlotte?" with a terse :

"Apparently not".

"Good. Neither am I."

He took her acceptance for granted. She pretended to study her programme, because that was the easiest way of avoiding his eyes, while he spoke a word or so with Mrs. Marradine.

"Jolly fine dance", he said. There was nothing he enjoyed more than a hunt ball. But some idiot had cut him over. His leg was giving him gyp. He'd have to go easy for a bit.

Mrs. Marradine rose and left them. The band played a few warning bars. Dancers were coming back to the floor.

Charlotte heard herself ask, "Is your ankle hurting you badly?"

"Badly enough to make me want to sit this one out", said Rupert.

He rose and offered her his arm.

§ 3

As they rested lightly on Rupert's sleeve, Charlotte's ungloved fingers still wanted to shake. But the worst of her fear seemed over. She could look at him again. She even noticed that he was wearing a fresh collar, and could chaff him for needing it.

"You're so strenuous", she said.

"Nothing of the dowager about me", he chaffed back; and went on, "Enjoying yourself?"

"Oh, rapturously."

The touch of malice with which she had answered his question surprised her. They passed out of the room. Behind them, the band struck up a one-step. Fear went from her; but, with returning confidence, came an excitement which seemed altogether childish.

"What about this?" said Rupert, indicating the little room through whose half-open door she had imagined a man and a girl springing apart at the sound of footsteps.

He pushed the door open. She took her hand from his arm; hesitated a second, and went in.

The room was empty, and rather dark. Taking those few steps to the fireplace, she heard Rupert shut the door, and turned to face him.

"Don't you think——" she began.

"That it would have been wiser to leave it open", he interrupted. "Possibly. But I've got something rather private I'd like to say to you."

He came closer. Her heart dropped one distinct beat. She could feel her pupils dilating. But fear still stood away.

"I presume you can guess what it is", he went on.

She made no attempt to answer him. He came closer still ; but made no attempt to touch her.

"Well?" His eyes were half-humorous, half-pathetic. Flashingly she thought, "I wonder how many other women he's made love to. I wonder if he knows how much money I can lose if I marry again".

Aloud she heard herself say, "I'm afraid you'll have to be a little more explicit, Rupert".

He hesitated a second ; then—or so it seemed to her—with no humour in his eyes, only the pathos, he said :

"You don't make it easy for a chap. But why should you ? I've been a bit of a rotter in my time. I only escaped being cashiered by the skin of my teeth. So perhaps I haven't got the right——"

Again, he hesitated—obviously expecting her to help him out. She had a violent impulse to help him out, but restrained it.

"But that's all over. Cross my heart it is, Charlotte. Won't you believe me ? Please."

She knew that she had nodded, that his right hand was grasping her left.

"Please", he repeated. "I love you so much. More than ever I did. Otherwise, I shouldn't be asking you to marry me."

He lifted her hand towards his lips. She wanted to prevent him from kissing it. "So silly", she thought. But all her strength seemed to be ebbing. She could not detach her fingers. The light brush of his moustache against her skin brought a flood of memories.

"Don't", she heard herself say—and, like some bashful schoolgirl, "Someone might come in."

He lowered her hand, but did not release it. More memories

assailed her. She knew that she was actually trembling. His other hand came out ; rested on her bare shoulder.

"We'll chance that", he said—and there was a note of mastery in his voice. "You asked me to be explicit. I have been. Now I want my answer. Will you marry me, Charlotte?"

Memories vanished. She was in the present once more. Wholly in the present—with something of her strength coming back to her, and a sudden revulsion on her, a strange foreknowledge of catastrophe.

"No", she wanted to say. But somehow her lips could not formulate the word ; somehow—stronger than the instinct to refuse him, stronger than revulsion, stronger even than foreknowledge—was the impulse to temporize.

"You've been so lonely", said that impulse. "You may be throwing away happiness. It might be all right. It could be all right."

And on that, once more, she heard her own voice—hers, too, with a touch of mastery in it—saying :

"I can't let you have your answer now, Rupert. You'll have to give me a little time to think it over. You see, I don't believe in chancing things".

She stopped there ; and the hand he held strove for release. Flashingly he thought : "Why all this palaver ? Why don't I just kiss her and have done ? That's what she'd like me to do—though maybe she doesn't realise it".

Gradually, however, the fingers of his right hand relaxed, and his left dropped from her shoulder.

"What my lady wants", he quoted with a laugh, "she must have." And he added, still laughing, "You'd have told me—wouldn't you—if my suit were quite hopeless?"

Once again, as over dinner, his eyes clashed with hers. Once again, hers were the first to fall.

"Yes", she admitted after a long pause.

Without another word, he moved to the door and opened it. Following him out, taking his arm again, letting him lead her towards the supper room, she realised how weak she had been.

§ 4

Once again—as they drove home from the hunt ball—John Carteret's widow, feeling Rupert's hand grasp for hers under the heavy rug, realised her own weakness.

But in the morning she woke to a new thrill. And throughout that day, throughout the next—with her eldest son back at St. Jude's, and the meet cancelled for a sudden frost—something of youth's own carelessness renewed itself, both in her body and her mind.

Life held many gifts. She had taken and enjoyed most of them. So why not take, why not enjoy, this last gift—while there was yet time?

They had—said that illusive carelessness of youth—plenty of time. She told Rupert so—as they sat alone by the fire in the Gallery on the evening of the second day.

"There's no hurry", she smiled that evening. "Elizabeth's to be married in August. We should have to wait till then anyway. So let me think it over a little longer."

That night, as they stood at the foot of the great staircase with Lollie's candlestick and Elizabeth's already gone from the table there, she repeated her, "I don't believe in chancing things".

Yet already that night she was conscious of a brand-new fear: whispering:

"You might lose this last gift".

And late on the next afternoon—with the ground still too hard for hunting and the twilight gathering fast as they lingered by the locked summerhouse—his arm went round her, and he drew her to him, and kissed her on the lips.

"Say yes", he pleaded. "Because I love you so much."

Giving him his yes, returning his kiss, it seemed to John Carteret's widow that all fears vanished in a great gush of tenderness towards this man who would—for the future—be more hers than John or Elizabeth or Philip or even Maurice.

"All mine", she thought. "For all the future." And, giving him more kisses, she thought, "He's so young. So much younger than I am. Just a boy, really".

It was those last thoughts, and not the illusion of her own youth, which made her say, both her hands in his, "Rupert, you must let me break it to the children. And don't hurry me about that, please, dear".

"Rather not", he said. "Now that I know you love me, nothing else really matters."

§ 5

There was a new moon that evening. Rupert called Charlotte's attention to it, just peeping up from behind the lower slope of King's Oak Hill, as they stood by the big window in Long Gallery with Laura and Elizabeth.

Elizabeth said, "It's lucky Maurice isn't here. He's awfully superstitious about seeing it through glass".

"All right if it's a cocktail glass", grinned Rupert.

He lifted his own to his eyes; looked through it, before he drank, "March Moon, I give you August's".

"Honeymoon", he explained to Elizabeth. "Yours and Dwight's. Here's to both of you. If Durbar Two wins the Derby and Princess Dorrie slips home in the Oaks, I'll give you a string of pearls for a wedding present."

"And what do I get?" asked Charlotte, off her guard for a moment.

"Diamond ring?" suggested Rupert.

Elizabeth, also not on her guard, said, "That sounds as though you were proposing to her".

But Rupert rode Elizabeth off with a laughing, "As though I should dare—without asking the family's permission". And hunting was almost over before Charlotte would agree, "If we really are going to be married in September, I suppose I'd better break it to them. Only—there's something I must break to you first".

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

§ 1

OFTEN nowadays, looking back nearly a quarter of a century on that last spring, that last summer of the England into which she and her like were born, Charlotte is tempted to picture them as one continuous dream of personal happiness.

But only very rarely does she yield to that temptation. Because—even with the dream at its rosiest—she had her warnings. And the first of those warnings came to her, very curiously, after she had told Rupert the terms of her husband's will.

She expected him, she sees now—and that is what made her immediate reactions so curious—to be more than a little distressed at the terms of the will. She had almost expected he might say, "I can't bear the thought of your giving up so much money to marry me".

What she had never expected was such complete insouciance, that careless, "If what you're trying to break to me is that we shan't be able to live at the Manor once John comes of age, all I can say is that I'm jolly glad to know it. No one likes his bit of hunting and shooting better than I do. But, quite frankly, darling, the mere idea of our burying ourselves in the country all the year round gives me the plurry hump".

Nor—much as she wanted to admire him for it—could she quite believe in the sincerity of his, "I don't like the idea of your taking a penny more from John than you're legally entitled to".

Yet Rupert, in the actual moment, spoke sincerely enough. He was in one of his super-romantic moods—all the ratiocinations which had preceded his proposal as good as forgotten.

"So you thought I was just a fortune hunter", he chaffed ;

and the warmth of his kisses, the emotions they kindled in her, drove that first warning clean out of her conscious mind.

Nevertheless Rupert's final, "What with your big bit and my little bit, we shall be able to manage a pot of caviar every now and again, so let's break the news to the litter and get that over", left her subconsciousness ever so vaguely troubled.

Money might not be all important. But to treat money matters as though they were of no importance was a bit too . . . Rupertish.

And didn't the man realise what a wrench it would be to cut oneself loose from the Manor after all these years?

§ 2

Rupert—it transpired—did realise something of Charlotte's love for the Manor.

"I expect you'll feel rather lost without all this", he said, later that night, with Elizabeth reluctantly departed to a "young people's dance" and Laura leaving them alone at the dinner table on the pretext of a headache. "But after all you'd have had to give it up sooner or later."

That of course was true. The Manor did not belong to her. Not one piece of this furniture, not one picture on these oak-panelled walls, was her own property. Everything belonged to John—and after him, to his children. Once John married, she would only be an occasional guest at this table.

Depressing thought!

Depression, however, could not last with Rupert continuing:

"And anyway we needn't jump that fence for the next couple of years. We shall have to hang on here till the lad's twenty-one and look after the place for him".

Neither could she be angry when he whispered to her, just after Simeon had brought the grog tray to the morning room, "September seems an awful long way off, sweetheart. I don't know how I'm going to be able to bear it. Why are you so unutterably lovely?"

Yet later that night—lying lonely in the vast room she had shared with another man—she had her second warning. Love

as Rupert imagined it—one super-romantic, super-poetic sex thrill—could not endure.

This second warning, unlike the first, never quite left her consciousness. Rupert's tribe—she always knew—was Reuben's. But could she love him any the less—mustn't she love him all the more—because his was the weaker vessel? Surely the very fact that his intellect had never stood guard over his emotions constituted his main attraction and her main duty.

"Just a boy", thought repeated as they rode out, under a sun that was almost springlike, to the hunt next morning. For essentially—both then and all through the months that followed—she remained the mother.

Charlotte did not know this—any more than she knew, till long afterwards, how her own emotions had abandoned their guard over her intellect. Love in which the physical element preponderated, though it did not make her quite blind, kept her sufficiently in the dark. Every time her intellect tried to show her some new flaw in Rupert's character, her emotions would insist, "Superficial", or "You'll be able to alter that once you're married to him", or, "He's such a good fellow at heart".

Three days after she had promised to marry him, nevertheless, came the third warning. September—repeated Rupert—*was* "an awful long way off". He could hardly bear it. She herself "might not be able to bear it".

Once before—imagining the fortress of her will proof against every assault—she had surrendered it to his kisses. It was that memory which made her say, breaking from him, yet laughing as she did so:

"Last time it was because you found me so 'unutterably lovely'. This time, it's because I'm so 'deliciously adorable'. You're a wonderful lover, aren't you, my dear? But somehow I fancy you'll be even more wonderful—and perhaps just a little bit safer—in London".

And to London—taking Elizabeth, Laura, Kate and one of the under-housemaids with her—she went.

§ 3

Rupert—rather flattered by the suggestion contained in that one word “safer”—travelled up to town on the same train ; and found occasion to protest, before they separated at the station, “I’m going to miss you like blazes. Can’t you hurry up and tell ’em you’re going to marry me ? Once that’s over I can see as much of you as I really want to”.

Accordingly, alone in Montpelier Square that first evening, Charlotte made up her mind to burn her boats.

The first person who ought to know of her decision to marry Rupert—it seemed to her—was not John, but George. Next day, therefore, she rang up George, who said dryly, “Rather important, eh ? Then I don’t think I’ll take the whole responsibility. Just wait till I find out what time Herbert can manage”, and, after keeping her at the instrument for the best part of three minutes, “He has to be in court all day. So shall we say five”.

And at five precisely she sat facing her two brothers-in-law across George’s inhumanly tidy desk.

Herbert—it had always seemed to her—was just a little less of a Carteret than George. Unlike his elder brother, he permitted himself a moustache, a paunch, and a breezy manner which concealed—from all except those who knew him best—a complete lack of interest in anyone’s affairs except his own.

“Well”, breezed Herbert, after the usual family inquiries, “and what’s it all about this time ? The young lady’s marriage, I suppose.”

“No”, said Charlotte bluntly. “My own.”

Herbert said, “Good God”. George said, “Why invoke the deity ? Our sister-in-law is still nubile”, and, “I trust you’re not trying to tell us that the wedding has already taken place, my dear”.

Despite herself, Charlotte laughed.

“We thought of September”, she went on.

“And who”, asked George, “may ‘we’ be ?”

Then she told them—and sat back to watch the effect.

Herbert’s face betrayed nothing whatever. She realised why. It didn’t matter a tinker’s curse to Herbert whether she

married Rupert—or Little Tich. But George—for George—seemed actually taken aback. She saw his lips open as if to begin a speech—and close again, as if he had thought better of what he intended to say.

"I admit I'm a little surprised", he said at last; then, speaking a trifle more slowly than usual, "Allow me to congratulate you, and to hope that you will be very happy."

Herbert said, "Carried unanimously", and, rising, offered her a large well-kept hand.

"You realise, of course", went on Charlotte's elder brother-in-law, with Herbert again seated, "what you will sacrifice by becoming Mrs. Whittinghame?"

"More or less."

"Perhaps you would like to know exactly." And George rang for one of his clerks—who came back in a few minutes, carrying a thick wad of foolscap and a copy of the will.

The conference that followed was a prolonged one. Every now and again, through the dry crackle of George's voice, Charlotte heard feet descending the uncarpeted oak stairs. Presently Herbert, pulling a heavy gold watch from his waistcoat pocket, interrupted with a hearty, "If I don't sign my letters, there'll be nobody left in the place to post 'em".

He went out. Once they were alone, George said with what seemed to her a faintly malicious chuckle, "We're rather talking without the book, you know. This income you'll be forfeiting goes to John—and he can do what he likes with the capital that produces it. But there's nothing to *make* him accept the capital sum. As a matter of fact, from one or two conversations I've had with him, I am under the impression . . ."

But on that Charlotte held up a protesting hand.

"You forget John's only nineteen", she interrupted.

For a moment or so George played with his silver pencil.

"Characters don't alter", he began, a trifle sententiously. "Especially Cartaret characters. As I read the boy's mind, his intention is to take the income of the trust fund that goes with the estate for himself—he must keep up the Manor whether he wants to or not—and to share the free moneys equally with his brothers and sister.

"Subject always", continued George, "to your retaining your full share as long as you live."

There he chuckled again before concluding, "If you were to marry someone of whom John thoroughly disapproved, he might change his mind when he reaches his majority. But otherwise I don't imagine he's likely to. And even if he did that, you and Whittinghame would have quite enough to be comfortable on. Unless, of course, you—er—added too many to your numbers".

On which Charlotte Carteret caught herself blushing for the first time in many years.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

§ 1

It was a quarter to seven before Herbert—who returned just in time to prevent George from elaborating the possibilities of his sister-in-law “having issue by her second husband”—handed Charlotte into his Daimler, and they drove off for Knightsbridge from that gem of a Georgian house behind Smith Square.

“You’re absolutely right, my dear”, breezed Herbert. “Somebody ought to be living in the place. It’s much too good to be used as a mere office. But you must remember there are slums both behind and in front of us. So we should hardly get much of a price. Besides, we’ve been there ever since we started. And you know what George is. He simply loathes change. I thought he’d have a fit when I first suggested we might use a typewriter.”

And it was just before they reached her front door—Charlotte was to remember in the years after—that Herbert, still on the subject of his brother, said, “He’s the same about investments as he is about everything else. Take those Russian railways of yours, and the German Threes, and one or two other foreign stocks. I’ve begged him over and over again to take the profit there is on them. I don’t believe in having too much money outside one’s own country”.

That warning, however, passed her altogether by.

The wise spending of money, her husband had taught her. But the investing of it had always been his particular business. Now it was George’s.

An impertinent old fellow, her brother-in-law George!

§ 2

Charlotte caught herself blushing again—as Kate dressed her for dinner—at George’s suggestion that she might have

children by Rupert. Somehow the idea—for all its naturalness—repelled her. Speculating why this should be, she remembered her mother's, "I wonder whether I let myself love him too much and you too little. Arthur had to come first. Because he needed me so".

"Rupert needs me like that", she decided. "He's as weak as father used to be. Weaker."

And thinking thus she was again aware of depression, till once again Rupert's voice—on the telephone this time—drove it away.

"Thought I'd ring up and hear how you were getting along", he said. "Thought you might like it if I popped in for the port."

"There's nothing I should like better", answered Charlotte truthfully. "But I'm going to write to John tonight, and Elizabeth wants to talk to me about her trousseau. So we'll have to leave it till tomorrow. Would you like to give me lunch somewhere?"

"Rather. Let's make it the Carlton. One o'clock as ever was. What have you been doing with yourself all day?"

"Seeing the wicked uncles, as you call them, for one thing."

"Did you drop the bomb?"

"I did. But they only congratulated me."

"Hoping against hope that you'd live happily ever afterwards."

"Shan't I?"

"What do you think?" laughed Rupert; and, after more banter, he rang off.

The little attention pleased her. Pleasing, too, were Elizabeth's good spirits, her animation, over dinner.

"I had a second letter from Dwight this afternoon", she said. "He'd just got mine. He says he's all for a country wedding. And for the first week in August. Aurelia's husband can get away after all. So we shall be quite a party at the Manor. But, mother, wedding dresses are a price. Lollie and I went to three different places this afternoon. And as for silk stockings, they're simply ruinous."

"I needn't go away in cotton ones, though, need I?" pleaded Elizabeth; and, after dinner, she insisted on "making

out a proper list", to which Laura suggested adding "approximate prices".

"How much did you spend on yours, mother?" asked Charlotte's only daughter, when Laura announced her "approximate total".

"Just about a quarter of what you're proposing to", smiled Charlotte.

"But I simply can't do with less. And you always say it's no good going to cheap shops, because one never gets the quality."

Again Charlotte smiled.

"As long as it doesn't come to more than that——" she began, only to feel those young arms round her neck, to hear that young voice say, "Darling, you really are wonderful. In some ways I shall simply hate leaving you. Won't you be awfully lonely without me and Laura?"

John Carteret's widow put down the list she had been made to study; and, freeing herself from her daughter's arms, quizzed her for a long second.

"You needn't worry about that", she said; then, speaking a little more quickly than her habit and with a slight catch in her throat:

"I meant to tell John before I told you. But I'm writing to him tonight. So you may as well know. I've promised to marry Rupert".

Laura feigned the polite surprise, the requisite pleasure. But Elizabeth's innate simplicity overcame tact.

"So Nan was right", said Elizabeth. "She told us it was bound to happen."

"Us?"

"Yes. John and me. Dwight, too. That afternoon we motored over to Cambridge."

Silence followed. Recovering herself, Elizabeth went on, "I'm jolly glad. He's such fun. You're bound to be happy. Won't Maurice be excited?"

But the girl, too, spoke a little more quickly than her habit. And, after she and Laura had gone upstairs to bed, Charlotte remembered her first judgment on Rupert, "Somehow or other, I can't imagine he's very reliable".

Her own unspoken agreement with Elizabeth's judgment, however, she forgot; and once again—as she wrestled with that difficult letter to John—her emotions blinded her intellect.

"You might let me have a line to say you don't disapprove too violently", she ended. "I propose spending the next two or three months in London. How many weeks' vacation will you take for Easter?"

§ 3

John's answer to Charlotte's letter arrived almost by return of post; and nothing in it seemed to justify those prognostications which had made her fruit knife shake, ever so slightly, as it slit the flap of the blue envelope with the crest of St. Jude's.

The phrases in the body of that answer seemed just a little stiff, just a trifle over-conventional. But the postscript, "Do you remember my telling you you were bound to get married again because you were such a stunner?" pleased her more than a little—and his letter to Elizabeth she never saw.

"What I've got to do", wrote John to Elizabeth, "is to make the best of what I believe is a bad business. Of course I may be wrong—and, for her sake, I jolly well hope I am. But somehow I can't feel he's really genuine—even when he goes out of his way to be nice to me."

There was a postscript to that letter also, "Whatever you do, don't let on about this even to Philip. I realise I've taken one of my spites—as mother calls them—to the chap. He's not the sort of type that appeals to me. So perhaps I can't be fair to him".

Elizabeth, more than ever preoccupied with her own affairs, and daily subjected to what Charlotte once called Rupert's "fatal fascination", replied, "I don't think you are being fair. I'm sure he wants to make mother happy, and after all that's the thing that really matters to all of us".

Accordingly John—who had as good as decided only to take a fortnight's vacation, and spend that walking in Switzerland, between Lent Term and Easter—changed his mind, and came to Montpelier Square; where he was joined by Philip and Maurice.

Philip, adroitly questioned, did not share John's doubts. Maurice justified Elizabeth's prophecy. Charlotte found it almost impossible—during those Easter holidays—to keep him out of a room if she and Rupert were in it. And there was nothing he liked so much as to be alone with Rupert.

"But don't you find him a nuisance?" she asked, one day when the pair of them returned from a visit—on which Maurice had insisted—to the Tate Gallery.

"Only when he will show me his sketch books and make me tell him where he's gone wrong", laughed Rupert. "Because of course I've never had a lesson in my life. So I can't possibly give him one."

And on another occasion, just before the end of the holidays, Rupert said:

"Why I really like him is because he's such a plucky little devil. They gave him hell at Harrow last term—serve him right, I expect—he's got no more sense of discipline than I had when I was his age. But he's not a bit afraid of the whoppings. All he's afraid of is that he won't get a fair trial for his house torpids".

§ 4

So those Easter holidays passed over; and after that for many weeks—with all three boys away from her—Charlotte experienced hardly any more warnings, Elizabeth's trousseau keeping her too busy, and Rupert keeping her too much in love.

Elizabeth's engagement was publicly announced in *Máy*. Her own—though she refused to let Rupert "bung it down to *The Times*, the *Post* and the old *D.T.*" until after her daughter's wedding—could no longer be kept secret. In addition to her shopping duties, therefore, she had social duties—a mass of correspondence, a constant round of lunch parties, dinner parties and dances, with race meetings in between.

"Not see the Derby?" protested Rupert. "Not go down for the Oaks? Miss a day at Ascot? Hang it all, darling, aren't we supposed to be doing the Season?"

And with his double at Epsom "rolling home for a real packet"—she was to remember in the after years that he never gave Elizabeth those promised pearls—he had to buy himself "something decent in the way of a horseless carriage" as well as "your ring".

She went with him to choose the ring—knowing, in her heart of hearts, that both it and his new car were unwarrantable extravagances.

Yet the first morning she woke to find that square-cut diamond on her engagement finger, she could not help lifting it to her lips.

"There's so much good in him", she thought that morning. "He's so kind. He's so liberal. He never speaks ill of anybody. And he's such fun."

He drove her and Elizabeth down to Harrow for Speech Day. And that, too, was fun—tinged with a strange excitement when the boys cheered Rupert (Maurice saw to that with his, "He was in the eighteen ninety-three eleven and he got a D.S.O. in the Boer War") after bill.

That day, nevertheless, brought its moments of sorrow—its one moment of misgiving. For how could she leave Harrow without visiting chapel, without looking on that tablet to the man whose name she still bore?

Her three children went with her into chapel. Rupert—and for this she felt strangely grateful to him—stayed outside. But, once reading those words, "He gave his life for others", she forgot Rupert completely, remembering only those three, silent behind her, and their father, and John.

It was strange how much—in those few moments—she missed her son, John; how much the recollection of his letter, received only that morning ("Sorry I can't manage to be with you after all, mother") hurt.

Nor was she altogether unaware of a second hurt—seemingly more grievous, though beyond intellectual analysis; for by then only the most minute rays of light could penetrate to her intellect. Neither could she hear the mother conscience whispering, "If only for their sakes, you will be doing wrong."

She was not—a sudden upsurge of the emotions began to tell her—contemplating any wrong. She had done her duty by

the husband whose final virtue this stone commemorated. She would always do her duty by his four children.

"Happy yourself"—her emotions assured her—"you will be a better guardian of their happiness."

And, back in the sunshine again, with the crowds about her, with Rupert's actual presence to reassure her of complete well-being, she put all sorrow and all misgivings aside.

"Jolly good day", said Rupert, as he rushed her and Elizabeth back to Montpelier Square. "Now for a jolly good evening."

They dined at the Berkeley that evening, and danced, at a great house in Grosvenor Square, till it was almost daylight; driving home, afterwards, in the only vehicle procurable—one of the last of the four-wheelers.

"Glad you gave Travers the night off. Reminds me of old times", said Rupert; and, halfway back to Knightsbridge, he whispered, his arm round her and her head on his shoulder, "Thank God, you're going to be really mine at last, my beautiful sweetheart".

But, during all those weeks, that was the only occasion on which he referred, even vaguely, to what had once been between them. The excitements of the immediate present gave him no time to think of the past; its obligations gave her none to consider the future.

July was almost August, with the date of Elizabeth's marriage definitely fixed; the invitations were out; the presents had begun to pour in; the Vansuythens had cabled "Sailing tomorrow" and Dwight's father, "Catching *Lusitania*", before—as Laura Marston put it—"one had time to turn round".

§ 5

Yet Charlotte, in those hectic weeks of London's last pre-war season, had found time to order and try on what Rupert called "your own wedding garments"; and she answered John, asking casually, "When are you going to get married, mother?" with a quiet, "On the first of September, dear. You won't mind cutting your continental holiday a little short for it, will you?"

John, who had not shown up on Colonel Pettigrew's coach at Lord's till the second day of the match, hesitated.

"Of course not. If you really want me to be there", he said at last.

One more warning.

Strange—how completely the very tone in which it was spoken passed her by.

CHAPTER THIRTY

§ 1

"It just doesn't seem possible", said Aurelia Vansuythen. "It just couldn't happen."

But her father still persisted that it might.

"The English", said Theodore Mansfield, prodding the turf with one of Charlotte's shooting sticks, "are the queerest folk. Take this fellow, Whittinghame. Remember what he said last night."

"Hot air", suggested Aurelia. "He doesn't want a war. He'd have to go if they declared it. He's on what they call their reserve. And then what about *his* marriage?"

"Meanwhile, though, what about Dwight's honeymoon?"

"You mean—you don't think it's safe for them to go to Paris?"

"I certainly do not."

Aurelia's father opened the shooting stick and sat down.

"If the Germans march", he went on, in his slow Philadelphian, "and it certainly looks as though they were going to, they'll be in Paris before you can say Jack Robinson. And once they've dealt with the French and the Russians, what's to stop them dealing with . . . this?"

He pointed a long dry hand to where the Manor lay below them in the afternoon sunshine.

"The British Navy", suggested Aurelia.

"With big guns mounted at Boulogne and Calais. I guess not. The Britishers will have to fight Germany now—or take their medicine afterwards. And if the Germans try to go through Belgium, they will."

He broke off, fanned himself with his white hat, and pulled out a cigar. Never had his daughter seen that mahogany-coloured, clean-shaven face so serious.

"So that's why you insisted on dragging me all the way up here", she said.

"Surely."

"*And* sent Cornelius up to London."

"I didn't send him. It was his own idea. He thought they might know the truth at our embassy."

"You've been very sly—both of you."

"Well—it's no good putting scares into folk."

"I can't imagine that anything would scare Charlotte."

"Whittinghame did—last night, with all that war talk of his. You weren't watching her. I was."

"Now you're just imagining things, father."

"No, I'm not. She's crazy about the fellow. She just couldn't bear the mere idea of having to lose him."

And:

"In my opinion, that fellow, Whittinghame, is a bit of a four-flusher", added Theodore Mansfield, just before they set off down the hill.

§ 2

"Nice Americans", pronounced John Carteret to his brother Philip, as they watched Aurelia and her father make their way down the hill, "are all right. But I don't care for the other sort much."

"What sort?"

"The chaps you're always reading about. Great big business men. 'Put all your eggs in one basket and watch that basket.' 'You go sell hogs like your pop done.'"

"You've got that last quotation all wrong", laughed Philip. "But I'd rather have a live American businessman—even if he was a bit vulgar—than Cornelius Vansuythen. Talk about English people being stiff. And I don't care for Aurelia too much either."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I think it's because I feel she's rather a snob. And I hate snobs."

"Dwight isn't."

"No", said Philip, "he's a jolly fine chap. Elizabeth's

lucky to have got him. Funny they're getting married so young, isn't it?"

"Not as funny as——" But there John broke off, biting on his bullet, as he had been biting on it ever since he had written that letter to Elizabeth—the one and only occasion on which he had given his feelings about his mother's marriage full rein.

"No good putting the others against it", John told himself, for the thousandth time since Easter. Aloud he said:

"I wish you were coming up to Cambridge next term".

"So do I", said Philip. "I'm a bit fed up with 'Floreant Herga'. Not that I expect St. Jude's will be much use to me. There isn't a tripos for making money, is there? Money's what I want. Buckets and buckets of it."

"Hear, hear", said a voice just behind them; and, turning, they saw Nan.

"Where's the bride?" asked Nan, inserting herself between them on the teakwood bench. "I've just come from the church. We really ought to have a rehearsal, you know . . . That's to say if we ever have the wedding."

John stared at her. Philip asked, "What on earth do you mean by that?"

Nan put up her parasol before she answered:

"Father had a letter from a friend of his at the Horse Guards this morning. He says we'll be at war by Monday".

John said, "Rot".

As he spoke, Aurelia and her father came up to them. All three rose.

"Miss Pettigrew is to be one of the bridesmaids", explained John, introductions over; and he went on, a trifle quickly, "I hope you enjoyed your walk, sir. We always think the view from the Fort is the best in the county".

The two Americans talked scenery for a few moments. Then they crossed the bridge over the sunk garden and disappeared into the house.

"If the tories were in power", said John next, "we might be idiots enough to go to war. But Asquith and Grey are a jolly sight too level-headed. We've enough trouble on in Ireland without that."

"Rather", agreed Philip. "And anyway it couldn't stop the wedding. So you were talking rot, Nan. As usual."

Nan said, "I was only ragging about that. Even if we're invaded, they could hardly get here by Tuesday. But if there is a war, it'll simply wreck my summer".

"On the other hand", countered Philip, "the galloping major might get a V.C."

This allusion to Rackstraw set Nan's face flaming. For once in her young life she sat silent.

"You really should have got him up to the scratch by this time", continued Philip mercilessly. "From all one hears, you've been working hard enough. When I saw you dancing with him at the Hurlingham Ball, I'd have been willing to lay a fiver on the orange blossoms."

But still Nan sat silent—the blood slowly ebbing from her cheeks.

"I always thought you were a swine, Philip", she said at last, "now I know it"; and John saw how her hands, her whole body tautened, as she rose and left them without another word.

"Gosh", said Philip then, "what a bull's eye. I had no idea she was as gone on him as all that. Girls *are* funny."

John said, very queerly for John, "I'm afraid you've hurt her, old chap. The best thing you can do is to cut along and apologise".

"Do you really think I ought to?"

But while the two brothers were still debating, one of the footmen came across the bridge to say, "Mrs. Henderson has just arrived, Sir John".

So that it was Elizabeth, walking solitary and full of her own happiness, who chanced on Nan, standing by the sundial in that little rose garden between the privet hedges; who put an arm round her, and asked:

"What *is* the matter, dear?"

"Nothing's the matter", lied Nan.

"Then why are you crying?"

"Only because I'm a fool. Only because I've got too much imagination. Only because it would be so damned unfair, because I couldn't bear it, if——"

She broke off, broke away, dabbing furiously at her eyes with a wisp of a handkerchief. This was a new Nan. Elizabeth could not understand her. She said as much.

"Thank God you don't", rapped out Nan. Then—very queerly for her, "Thank God somebody's happy". And:

"Go away now, there's a darling. Leave me alone. I'd rather be alone. Honestly, I would".

So Elizabeth, also, went back across the bridge into the house.

§ 3

With the arrival of Gertrude Henderson, in full Victorian panoply, followed—shortly after tea time—by George Carteret in his Arrol Johnston, Herbert, and Herbert's wife Louisa, in their Daimler—the Manor, as Rupert put it to Charlotte, was a full house.

That Saturday night—including Maurice, Laura, and Cornelius Vansuythen, whom Travers brought back from Laxford Junction just in time to dress—they sat down fifteen to dinner. And at Sunday's lunch Aurelia's precocious Mercy made them one more.

"Forty-eight hours to go", chuckled Dwight, sitting next to his Elizabeth, as Simeon and his satellites handed round the roast beef and the vegetables, "and it'll be wedding cake."

Yet, even while she watched those two at lovers' whispers, Charlotte grew conscious of the Sword.

These last nights, she had only dreamed of a sword. But today that phantom blade was real. It hung over them—over every head at this table. Soon, its gleaming point would fall . . .

Frantically she tried to drive that symbol of her imagination away. Rupert—why, ever since Friday night, had Rupert been in such a state of suppressed excitement?—always exaggerated. There was not going to be a war. We should not "sick the navy on that lunatic, the Kaiser, send out an expeditionary force, and give the Germans a jolly good drubbing".

Even Theodore Mansfield didn't believe that. He had only insisted that "our young folk" should spend the first week

of their honeymoon in Scotland "until this scare's blown over".

Why then—and so suddenly—should her own nerve have gone?

It had gone—and all confidence with it. No use trying to bluff oneself any more. No use thinking George a panicker just because of those words, spoken as they came out of church this morning, "Have it your own way, my dear. Let us eat, drink and be merry while we can. But I can't for the life of me see what makes you so optimistic".

Because Herbert—for all that breezy, "I don't see why we should worry. Even if there is going to be a scrap, it'll be over by Christmas. Nobody'll be able to afford it any longer"—must agree with George. So must Aurelia's husband—though he, too, pretended optimism.

Pretended!

For the sake of these two children who were to be married on Tuesday.

Rather gallant of Aurelia's Cornelius. Theodore Mansfield, too, was playing the gallant. So why couldn't Rupert hold his tongue? Why couldn't mother hold hers?

§ 4

"I can't believe that even a radical government will sink to such depths as to allow the Germans to overrun Belgium", protested Gertrude Henderson as they rose from luncheon that Sunday. And: .

"Doesn't she understand", thought Charlotte, keeping up her own pretence all that afternoon, "doesn't he himself understand, don't any of them understand how much I love Rupert?"

Yet even the significance of that warning—very last she was to be given—passed her by.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

§ 1

CURIOUSLY enough everything that happened between that Sunday afternoon and the day of Elizabeth's wedding, seems to have passed Charlotte by. Looking back on those thirty-six hours after nearly a quarter of a century, her memory is a blank. She cannot recall one incident, one scrap of conversation.

Yet no single incident of the Tuesday can she forget.

She still sees, as clearly as though it were yesterday, the pattern the first light made against her chintz curtains. She can still remember her exact feelings as she slipped out of bed, and went quietly across the big room to open those curtains, and stood to watch that one tiny cloud turn rose-pink over King's Oak Hill.

"It can't happen", she felt. "The world's too beautiful." And for a little, back in bed, she allowed herself to dream of happiness—Elizabeth's with Dwight, her own with Rupert.

"Just a month now", she thought, "and I'll be married too."

To that thought, she fell asleep again, dreamlessly, till the chirp of birds re-awoke her; and, once more, she allowed herself to dream of happiness, of Rupert's arms round her, of his lips pressed on hers.

"There's nothing to be frightened of, sweetheart", Rupert seemed to be whispering. "Nobody's going to take me away from you. Ever."

And that was the moment when she heard his actual voice.

Rupert—queer that he of all people should be up so early—must be on the terrace. She could just make out that he was adjuring someone "not to make a row". Then, hearing a second voice—obviously Maurice's—she slipped out of bed and made for the window again.

As she crossed the worn carpet, it struck her—vaguely and for the first time—that, every now and again, Rupert's intonations and Maurice's could be curiously alike.

They were away from the terrace—Negus at Maurice's heel—before she had twitched the curtains apart again. She saw that they were making for the garage. Presently she heard the chug of Rupert's engine and the long green tourer, having crept down the drive, accelerated round the lake for the lodge gates.

She looked at the watch on her dressing table. Where could those two be going—at half-past six?

No more sleep in her, she drew all the curtains and let sunshine flood the room. Her household was already astir. She could hear feet along the corridors. Another quarter of an hour—and Kate brought her tea.

"A lovely day we're going to have for the wedding, m'lady", said Kate; and stood in thought for a second before she continued, "Mr. Simeon was down to the village after dinner last night, m'lady. There were some of they Territorials there. And they thought——"

"Yes, Kate." Charlotte's voice was very calm; but her maid still hesitated, plucking at her long skirt with an unsteady hand.

"They thought as how there was bound to be war", she said at last, "because they're not breaking camp today, like they usually does . . . Shall I draw your bath, m'lady?"

"Please."

Kate went out. Quickly, Charlotte drank her tea and followed to the bathroom. As she came out she heard Philip singing, "John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave", and thought, "Why must he choose that song, of all songs, this morning?"

Still in her dressing gown, she went along the landing and down the three steps to Elizabeth's room.

"Darling. How nice of you."

Elizabeth was still in bed. She opened her arms and drew Charlotte's head down to her. The touch of those young lips smoothed away annoyance, stilled fear.

"Lollie says", went on Elizabeth, "that it'll be ever so much

easier if I have breakfast up here. Otherwise I shall only have to dress twice. So she's arranging it. You don't mind?"

"Of course not."

"And you'll come up again as soon as you've had your own breakfast?"

Charlotte nodded.

"Happy?" she asked.

"Rather. Only I wish we hadn't had to alter the arrangements. It seems so silly to go all the way up to Scotland and then all the way back to Paris. You don't think there's going to be a war, do you? Dwight doesn't."

"Bridegrooms", laughed Charlotte, "are always right."

But, outside the door, her heart failed her for a moment; and once again, as she fastened up her cotton frock and went slowly downstairs to breakfast, she was conscious of the Sword.

§ 2

After some thought Charlotte had decided that breakfast should be a "scratch meal", served by Ellen and one of the footmen in the morning room. Waiting alone there, she heard Rupert's car come back.

Almost simultaneously Maurice dashed in, carrying a bundle of papers.

"We got up early and fetched them from Laxford", almost shouted Maurice. "They're frightfully exciting. The Germans have invaded France. And Luxembourg. Mater—who's the Duchess of Luxembourg?" And without waiting for an answer he rattled on, "Cousin Rupert says we shan't be able to keep out of it now, even if we want to. Oh, I do wish I was a soldier".

Automatically Charlotte corrected him, "*Were* a soldier".

"Oh, damn grammar", said Maurice. "Do look, mater. I'm not exaggerating."

He opened one of the papers. "WAR BY MIDNIGHT?" she read; and knew that she would need every scrap of her courage to get through the next hours.

Maurice—in gray trousers, a blue coat and a flannel shirt

with an open neck—had neither washed nor brushed his hair. She sent him off to “make himself tidy”. He went, grumbling, “Women are funny. We had a most awful job to get those papers. Rupert gave the man half a sovereign for them. And you haven’t even said, ‘Thank you’”.

Alone again, she glanced hastily through the other papers. Only one headline gave even a hope of peace.

“But we must have the wedding”, she heard herself say, very softly, to a face that stared straight at her from the big mirror over the mantelpiece.

And, just as she said that, she saw another face in the mirror—Aurelia’s, whiter, more drawn than her own.

“I met Maurice just as I was coming down”, said Aurelia. “He says the French and Germans are fighting already. So father was right.”

She grabbed for one of the papers—and remembered, abruptly, that she was a Colonial Dame.

“We must make the best of it”, she went on. “It’s lucky they’re getting married rightaway. Though I don’t suppose that’ll help any. Nothing’ll keep Dwight out of it.”

“Dwight!”

For a long second, Charlotte eyed Aurelia. For long seconds, Aurelia did not speak.

“I oughtn’t to have let on”, she said at last. “But Cornelius found out quite a lot on Saturday. And when he told Dwight, Dwight said that if you came in, he would have to volunteer. You see why, don’t you?”

For the first and only time that day, Charlotte swore.

“I’m damned if I do”, she said.

“You would if your mother had been a Southerner”, explained Aurelia. “Your John saved Dwight’s life. He feels that . . . kind of puts him under an obligation to England.”

“And you agree with him?”

“Surely. So does Cornelius. So does father.”

Once again Charlotte eyed Dwight’s sister, saying to herself, “And I always imagined I understood these people. I always imagined they were much the same as we are”.

But aloud, with Laura just coming through the doorway, all she said was, “Oh!”

§ 3

Nobody else appeared at the breakfast table for the next quarter of an hour. Words between the three women were few. As though by mutual consent, they banned war from their talk. So, to Charlotte's surprise, did Rupert, who lounged in as Laura finished her tea.

"Happy the bride", he quoted. "I just looked into the ancestral banqueting hall. Simeon's fairly in his element laying out all the silver and giving it a last furbish. Gosh, I'm as hungry as five hunters."

"You shouldn't get up so early", said Charlotte, thinking, "He never even kissed me".

Philip, too, forgot to kiss her that morning. She perceived that he was just as excited as Maurice, who came in with him, but controlling himself better.

John, whom she met with Dwight on her way through the hall, did not seem at all excited. He kissed her as usual—or perhaps just a little more warmly, laughing :

"Cornelius overslept himself. So I've had to act best man and get the bridegroom up. How do you think he's looking?"

"Resigned to his fate", laughed back Charlotte.

"Call it eager", said Dwight; and looked up at his father, who was just descending the staircase, to exclaim :

"Hallo, dad. Why the glad rags for breakfast? Plenty of time to put them on afterwards. That's what I'm going to do".

"I thought I'd rather like to read the papers after breakfast", said Theodore Mansfield casually. "They usually get here by about a quarter of ten."

"They're here already", said Charlotte. "Captain Whittinghame fetched them for us."

The three men disappeared into the morning room. Alone, she moved to the foot of the great staircase; stood there a moment, her right hand grasping for the newel post.

Willy nilly, she found herself praying, "O God, stop it. Stop it. Don't spoil Elizabeth's happiness".

But it was the thought of her own happiness in jeopardy—as the after years showed her—which set her knees trembling as she went on up the stairs . . .

§ 4

Charlotte's knees were still weak under her when she re-entered Elizabeth's room. Less than a week ago, life had seemed so kindly, her days so certain in their courses. This morning, there was no more kindness, no more certainty left in her little world.

The very brilliance of the sunshine, she felt, was a cruel joke.

"Happy the bride!"

But for how long?

And her own chance of happiness?

Wrecked!

She knew, even in that moment—while she was still telling herself, "Dwight won't volunteer. They won't let him. And it wouldn't be chivalrous. She's such a child, little more than a baby"—that her own chance of happiness was irretrievably wrecked; that this war would take Rupert—had already taken him?—from her.

But there, very curiously, knowledge came to a dead end.

She had no prescience of universal catastrophe, only of personal disaster. It never even crossed her mind that the news Maurice had blurted out could affect John or Philip. The sheer passion, the sheer blindness of her love for Rupert obscured that issue, making her—just for this one day in her existence—less the mother than the mate.

The mother instinct did not quite fail. It gave her sufficient strength to play her part when Elizabeth, just sitting down to her tray, said: "Maurice ran in to tell me the news. It sounds rather bad. Do you think we really *shall* declare war on Germany?"

Yet the secret thought behind her, "I shouldn't worry my head about that if I were you, dear. You've plenty of other things to think about between now and twelve o'clock", ought to have betrayed to Charlotte—did betray to her in the after years—her own truest feelings.

For secretly, both then and all through the half-hour which followed, she was thinking, "How selfcentred the child is. Doesn't she understand the difference this war may make—must make—to *me*?"

§ 5

That secret thought was still nagging Charlotte when she left Elizabeth; and—happening to glance at her diamond wrist watch as she made her way back to the hall—she experienced the queerest anger. First against Rupert. Then, even more queerly, against Maurice.

It was only half-past nine. If it hadn't been for those two, the papers wouldn't be in the house yet. If it hadn't been for those two, nobody would know.

And now everybody knew. She could tell that by the footman's face, by Simeon's, the moment she entered the dining room. These men's minds were no longer exclusively on their work.

She exchanged a word or two with Simeon, telling him how nice the table looked and giving him his last orders. From the dining room she passed through a narrow corridor into the big kitchen. There, too, faces—and a sudden hushing of gossip—betrayed knowledge.

Soon—with her kitchenmaid and her vegetable maid sent about their businesses in the scullery—Mrs. Pettifer was asking, "Do you think we're going to have a war, m'lady?"

"I do not", lied Charlotte, and might have persuaded herself that the lie was true, had it not been for Rupert—at the telephone just as she re-entered the hall.

"My London call", she heard Rupert say. "Splendid." And, a moment later, "Is that you, Parker? Just listen. I'm rather expecting a telegram. The moment it comes, open it—and telephone it through to me here".

He gave the Manor number; repeated it; rang off; turned to her approach, and said, "Hallo, darling".

She asked, apparently calm, "What was all that about?"

"Oh, nothing very important."

But his dark eyes were furtive—and once again she was conscious of that suppressed excitement.

"I expect you're pretty busy", he went on.

"I am rather."

"Anything I can do?"

She thought, hopelessly, "How can *we* be talking like this?"

As though—as though we were strangers”, before she said :

“Not that I’m aware of. Isn’t it about time you started to dress ?”

Rupert looked at the grandfather clock near the open doorway through which the sunshine streamed.

“It doesn’t take me two hours to tog myself up”, he laughed.

Then the telephone rang again ; and, as Rupert’s hand reached for the receiver, both her sight and her hearing seemed to fail.

“For Mr. and Mrs. Mansfield, eh ? Half a tick till I get a pencil”.

Rupert’s words were still faint.

“Telegram from Rackstraw”, he said when he had finished writing. “The silly ass oughtn’t to have sent it off so early.”

He handed her the message : “So sorry can’t be with you as arranged every good wish for your happiness”. Reading, her eyes were still blurred.

“Bit of a blow for our Nan”, suggested Rupert. “He was going to stay with them after the tamasha. But of course he can’t get away—with all leave cancelled.”

Words escaped before Charlotte could check them.

“How did you know that ?” she asked.

He hesitated a perceptible second.

“It happens”, he said slowly, “to be in the papers.”

Voices from the terrace disturbed them. Cornelius Vansuythen’s spare figure, Dwight’s and Aurelia’s, blocked the sunlight.

Rupert, with a casual, “I’m just going to take a last squint at the presents”, loafed away.

Aurelia said, “I must go and see to my little bridesmaid. Since Mary Steevens married that steward of hers I just have to look after everything”, and trotted off up the staircase.

Charlotte—having shown Dwight Rackstraw’s message—followed Aurelia.

Those chance words about Mary Steevens had conjured up memories. For the split of a second, it seemed to her that she stood looking down into that black chasm which had

yawned between a ship's deck and the gunwale of a long swaying boat.

Suddenly she found herself thinking, "But you weren't nearly as afraid—then".

§ 6

For so many fears nagged at the mind of Charlotte Carteret as she went, still clutching that piece of paper on which Rupert had scribbled Rackstraw's message, along the known landing, through the slants of sunshine from its narrow windows, to her own room.

All the while Kate dressed her, she had to fight those fears ; to tell herself, over and over again, "Even if there is going to be a war, he's too old. Nearly forty. So they won't take him. And they won't take Dwight either. Because he's an American".

Yet all the while she fought with those fears, she was aware of another—the first real fear she had ever experienced—one she had imagined, for the best part of two years now, to be dead.

Why wasn't that fear dead ? Why must it rise, horribly, from the grave where her common sense had buried it ? Why should it again be whispering, as it had whispered, long ago in the night time, "Be sure your sin will find you out" ?

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

§ 1

HER mother's bony knuckles on her door, her mother's gruff voice asking, "Can I come in?" drove all but the immediate present from Charlotte's startled mind.

The distant memory—and the close, Rupert's voice, hesitant as only one other voice in the world hesitated on a prevarication—were wiped out.

Momentarily she forgot them. Momentarily all her fears stood away.

Gertrude Henderson, in purple velvet, moved grandly across the room, and took the armchair by the dressing table.

"We're lucky with our weather", she began, mindful of Kate's presence; and continued to make conversation in her best *prenez-garde-il-y-a-les-domestiques* manner till the maid—Charlotte's toilet finished—left them alone.

"You've seen the papers, I presume?" she asked then.

"Yes, mother."

"So have I. Apparently we're still shilly-shallying. Personally I think it's a great pity. The sooner we start on these Germans, the sooner we shall finish them off."

Something of hate surged in Charlotte. "It's all very well for you", she wanted to say. "You're an old woman. You've got nobody to lose." Instead, she kept silence, pretending to put the last touches to her hat and hair.

"I gather you don't agree", went on her mother, in a tone which positively demanded answer.

"I've got other things to think about", she parried.

Somewhat to her surprise, Gertrude did not sniff.

"We all have", she admitted. "At least until today's over."

Then she in her turn fell silent; and when she next spoke it was in a strangely altered voice.

"You're angry with me", she said. "You've been angry with me ever since I came. But I can't help being myself, any more than you can help being yourself. And I can't bear to think of England dishonoured. As we shall be, if we keep out."

§ 2

Gertrude had been gone—ostensibly to "array myself in ostrich feathers"—for a good three minutes. But Charlotte still sat at the mirror, feeling curiously small.

Yet at the same time she was annoyed with herself—for having been so moved.

"Patriotism", her thoughts sneered. "How Victorian."

Yet her mother's last words had struck a chord which was still vibrant. For how could one sneer at that simple, "I'm thinking about my boys. You know I always give them what they call a pi-jaw at the beginning of each term. The one thing I always tell them is that if they make a promise they're bound to keep it. How am I going to tell them that, next term—if we don't keep *our* promise about Belgium"?

Victorianism? Possibly. But Victorianism at its best.

Thinking thus, Charlotte rose, tall in her dove-gray satin, from the dressing stool. She was still annoyed with herself, still—and increasingly—aware of her own insignificance; of a novel powerlessness to alter the course of events.

This very lack of power, nevertheless, seemed to have given her back her pluck.

When her mother knocked, she had been fighting fears. Now—though she was just beginning to remember those fears—they seemed as small as her own personality. They didn't matter. Nothing mattered—except that this wedding day of Elizabeth's should be a happy one.

Thinking thus, she went straight to Elizabeth's room.

Lollie had just helped the girl into her wedding dress. By the bed, bending over the veil that lay there, stood Nan, in her pink bridesmaid's frock.

"I thought you were going straight to the church", said Charlotte.

"So I meant to—originally." Nan's voice was steady.

"But we altered the arrangements last night. On the telephone. Didn't Elizabeth tell you?"

"Oh, dear", said Elizabeth, with a hairpin in her mouth, "I forgot."

"I hope you don't mind, Lady Carteret", went on Nan; and at any other time Charlotte might have noticed that the voice, despite its steadiness, sounded strangely submissive. But as it was she did not even remember Rupert's, "Bit of a blow. He was going to stay with them after the tamasha", as she said, casually:

"By the way, Elizabeth, you and Dwight have had your first telegram. I meant to bring it along with me. But I left it on my dressing table."

"Who from?" asked Elizabeth.

"Major Rackstraw. Apparently he can't get away from Aldershot."

"So Nan's just told me. Poor man. It must be perfectly beastly there in this weather."

Neither of them, in that moment, could see Nan's face, the cheeks pale under her stepmother's rouge and powder, the light eyelashes quivering as she bent over the bed again—that very veil a reproach.

§ 3

It was twenty minutes past eleven before Charlotte pinned on her daughter's veil, and made her walk across the room in her ivory satin train.

"You'll do", she said, with just a touch of pride in her voice; and Laura, "I think she looks perfectly lovely. Aren't you awfully excited, dear?"

"I am rather", admitted Elizabeth.

Nan produced the long white gloves from their tissue; Laura plied the buttonhook.

"Stay here till I send for you", said Charlotte; and went downstairs, to find only John, Philip and Maurice in the hall.

"Where's everybody else?" she asked.

"We turfed Cornelius and the groom out", said Philip. "They ought to be at the church in another ten minutes. Most of the field's on the terrace. Rupert hasn't come down yet."

"I'll go and hurry him up", said Maurice, and ran off just as Kate appeared with the bouquet.

Through the open doors by which Simeon was standing, came the sound of voices, of one motor engine chugging, of many horses' hoofs on gravel.

"I don't know why you wanted to hire carriages", grumbled Philip. "They're as extinct as the dodo. And this collar of mine's starting to melt already."

"Omne ignotum pro magnifico", chuckled George Carteret, emerging with the last of a cigar between his lips from the morning room. "This is an occasion, my boy. Observe also the gray topper of the next bridegroom—carried by his page in attendance."

And he pointed a bony hand to where Maurice was following Rupert, resplendent in shepherd's plaid trousers and a gardenia, down the stairs.

"All present and correct", declared Rupert, taking his hat and his gold-mounted malacca from Maurice. "About time the lesser lights were proceeding, I fancy." He took a list from the pocket of his lavender waistcoat, and puckered his eyes at it as he went on, "I hear Nan's turned up. She'll have to go with the bride, I suppose. So what happens to Little Willie?"

"Couldn't you come with us, captain?" asked Maurice.

"All right, trumpeter. If there's room, and your mother approves of the staff work."

He looked at Charlotte, and from her to the clock.

"Time to get the party mounted", he smiled.

She smiled back, "Yes. Do that. There's a dear". But the sudden alteration in their plans—the fact that he would not be driving to the church with her—seemed as ominous as that little cloud which had just obscured the sun.

Rupert went out through the big doorway. Maurice followed him. Both still carried their hats. George chuckled Latin again, "Non angli sed angeli. Does our minimus sing in the choir, Philip? He ought to, with that flaxen hair of his".

"Limericks are more in that little devil's line than hymns", put in John. "If he behaves himself decently in church, it'll be a miracle. He's absolutely above himself this morning."

It was the best part of a year since John had spoken like that about Maurice. For the fraction of a second Charlotte caught herself speculating whether some incident could have revived the antagonism between them. But, after that one split of a second, all consecutive thought abandoned her, and her knees began to tremble again, so that she could hardly stand still.

Rupert called, "To horse, ladies and gentlemen". George and Philip went out to the carriages. Laura came running down the staircase. Laura said, "Elizabeth's getting fidgety. Hasn't Dwight gone yet?" Charlotte managed to say, "Oh, yes. She can come down now if she wants to".

But that was all she could manage . . . because George had been such an old idiot . . . because George, with that quotation of his . . . because those two bare heads, as they went out through the doorway . . .

Then, abruptly, her knees ceased their trembling as she caught John's eyes.

There was something so steady, so reliable, about John's eyes. Like his father before him, he had little or no imagination. Today of all days, she must control her own imagination—not let it run away with her—as it had run away with her—because of a chance word, a chance trick of light and shadow.

She told herself this—once, twice and yet a third time—as she watched John give his top hat a last smoothing with his shirt cuff, as she heard Elizabeth's, "Here I am, mother darling", as Elizabeth came slowly down the great staircase, Nan carrying her train.

§ 4

The last of the carriages had passed the lodge gates and turned left for the village before John, with yet another glance at the gold watch which had been his father's, told Travers, "We may as well start now. Only take it easy, we don't want to pass any of them", and climbed up beside him on the driving seat; before Simeon came to the side window of the limousine and wished, "The very best of luck to you, Miss Elizabeth".

And by then there was never a cloud across the sun.

"It looked like rain for a minute or two", said Laura, sitting by Nan.

Nan said, "That would have been a pity".

Elizabeth, sitting by Charlotte with her bouquet on her lap, laughed, "You're always so superstitious, Lollie. As though a drop of rain mattered".

"You couldn't have had the carriage open to come back in", protested Laura. "That was all I was worrying about. And rain wouldn't have been nice for the poor photographers?"

"Oh, bother them. I hate being photographed anyway. Don't you, Nan?"

"No. I rather like it. Besides it wouldn't be a proper wedding otherwise."

The three continued to argue. Listening to them in silence, Charlotte remembered her own wedding—in London, more than twenty years ago.

She remembered, too, as they drove through the gates, how this same old Matthews had stood there, touching his forehead in just the same old-fashioned way, on her return from her honeymoon.

Not a very happy honeymoon—hers.

The thought seemed disloyal. She drove it from her; joined in the conversation. Soon they neared the village—all its shopfolk at their doors.

A few of the elder ones—Mrs. Brabazon, the postmistress, among them—curtsied. Tibbetts, the innkeeper, standing by the open doorway of "The Royal Arms", whipped off his straw hat. Children waved handkerchiefs or cheered.

Bowing and smiling, Charlotte noticed three or four men in khaki. But that omen passed her by.

"My people", thought the feudalist in her, as they climbed up and out of the village for the church.

§ 5

All round the low walls of the churchyard stood cars or carriages. But a space had been left by the lych gate; and there more children waited to greet the bride.

John helped Elizabeth out. The children threw flowers

at her feet. She smiled at them through her veil ; and Charlotte said, "Thank you, my dears ; that was nice of you", as she followed on, Nan beside her, out of the sunshine into the coolth under the porch, where John, with an unaccustomed note of command in his voice, ordered, "You go and sit down now, mother. I bring the procession along".

Chatter hushed, many heads turned towards the doorway, as she and Laura passed down the aisle to their front pew.

Laura knelt to pray. Covering her face with her gloved hands, Charlotte experienced a sudden tenderness for her. Laura would have to go now. A faithful, decent soul. One must try to find her another place. One must give her a good present.

She uncovered her face to see Rupert, with only Philip between them, smiling at her. How handsome he v is, her Rupert. How much she loved him. How happy they were going to be, if only, if only . . .

But Philip's, "Here comes the bride", turned her head, too, towards the doorway ; and again only tenderness suffused her, as the organ played Elizabeth, on John's arm, Maurice and Mercy carrying her train, and her four bridesmaids, slowly up the aisle.

She prayed then, as she had not prayed while she was covering her face with her fingers ; and, after that short inarticulate prayer, memory grew active again ; so that this John, standing so stiffly with Cornelius Vansuythen behind Dwight and Elizabeth while the vicar began, "Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God", might have been his very father.

Yet, even so, she could not quite forget Rupert, or the sword that might sunder her from her Rupert—and Elizabeth from her Dwight.

He was already promising—Elizabeth's Dwight. To love her. To comfort her. To honour and keep her. To keep only unto her, "so long as ye both shall live".

But how long would he live—how long would Rupert live—if they went to this war ? And suddenly, as that question grew articulate, Charlotte Carteret's eyes were drawn up and away from the two whose hands the vicar was just joining, to

those emblems of war—to those tattered flags above the altar ; suddenly it seemed to her that even the white lilies on that altar were tinged with blood.

The hallucination passed. Listening to human words again, watching the human shapes again, she knew it for hallucination—for a mere trick of the light falling through the stained glass oriel window. And now Elizabeth and her Dwight were kneeling. Now they were standing. Now there was music once more ; human voices singing, “Let the people praise thee, O God : yea, let all the people praise thee”.

And since these singers were her own people, how could she show herself afraid ?

§ 6

Once again, nevertheless, before John leaned across the pew rail to say, still with that unaccustomed note of command in his voice, “Come along, mother. You’ve got to sign the book now”, Charlotte was afraid.

For the vicar, in his address, had spoken of war ; and, glancing sideways just as he asked them to pray that, “this shadow may be lifted from the country we all love so dearly”, she had noticed Rupert’s face.

There had been contempt on that handsome face ; yet in those eyes, they too lifting to the flags above the altar, an overwhelming desire.

And because her intellect had interpreted—in one grim flash of knowledge—both that contempt and that desire, Charlotte’s very feet went numb as they carried her up those two steps and over the worn brasses into the vestry.

Even while she kissed Elizabeth knowledge persisted, “Rupert wants this war. He wants the adventure of it. More—far more—than he wants you”.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

§ 1

"MORE—far more—than he wants you."

Occasionally, even nowadays, with nearly a quarter of a century between her and that fourth of August which saw Elizabeth and Dwight married, Charlotte remembers those exact words, as loud in her mind as though some other woman had spoken them.

For those words—she now realises—imparted the whole truth.

Yet, at the time, her thoughts gave her only the barest inkling of the truth. Physical love refused knowledge. Was she to care less for Rupert—she asked herself—because he had no fear of this war?

Others had followed her into the vestry—George, bringing Elizabeth's marriage settlement, Theodore Mansfield, Aurelia. The presence of so many people heartened her. The mere mechanical act of signing her name seemed a reassurance that life must continue as it always had continued.

"Wars don't last forever", she told herself. "Men come through them. And with honour."

John's voice commanded again, "If that's all, Uncle George, it's time for the wedding march". She saw Dwight offer his arm to Elizabeth; heard the opening bars from the organ; summoned all her courage to carry her through the next hours.

§ 2

There is no need of those large faded photographs, at which Charlotte has not looked for years, to refresh her memory of the next hours. She can still see, as clearly as though they

were creatures of yesterday, that group taken just outside the church.

Elizabeth has her fingers on Dwight's arm. They are staring, a little woodenly, at the camera. Maurice has posed himself, topper in one hand, stick in the other. Little Mercy has her mouth open; Nan's lips are drawn to a tight line. Her own face is cut by the shadow of the big hat she is wearing. Tall on one side of her, stands Rupert; short on the other, John.

Cornelius Vansuythen, Aurelia and her father complete that picture—all the other faces being out of focus, so that one can only guess at their identities. But the next picture shows bride and bridegroom, in an open victoria drawn by two greys, smiling at recognisable children now grown to manhood and womanhood with children of their own.

Bells pealed as the coachman with the white favour cracked his ribboned whip and those greys trotted off from the lych gate. Mrs. Brabazon curtsied again, Tibbetts waved his straw, one of the men in khaki—with a sergeant's stripes on his arm—saluted the next carriage, the one in which Charlotte rode back to the house.

Rupert sat facing her on that return.

She recollects how he chaffed her, "My lady of the Manor acknowledges the obeisance of her serfs", and her mother saying, "Serfs indeed. With Lloyd George and his ninepence for fourpence. No wonder the lower orders don't know their places nowadays", and John's square teeth reaching for his lower lip to keep his face straight, and herself brooding, "We might have had a proper sit-down wedding breakfast if I hadn't had to invite so many people. Why didn't I think of a marquee? They'll never get into the dining room"; and Rupert, jocular again, bowing low, sweeping his topper almost to the ground in mock courtesy as he helped her out.

Elizabeth and Dwight were in the Gallery by then, standing under the bell of flowers by the big bow window. She can remember the flush on Elizabeth's cheeks, and the self-satisfaction of her, "It went off splendidly, didn't it, mother? I wasn't a bit nervous over my responses"; and even that faint touch of almost-jealousy when Rupert said, "This is

where the bride gives her prospective stepfather a real loving kiss”.

Yet because he turned straight from Elizabeth to kiss her and held her to him for a moment, physical love blinds Charlotte again; and suddenly, with all these known faces crowding in on her, she forgot the world outside.

There was no world outside—only these kindly walls, and these kindly people, shaking hands with one, laughing and chaffing with one, as they always had laughed and chaffed, little too decorously, a little too stiffly perhaps, but never without that assurance which seemed as though it said “Yesterday and today and tomorrow, time cannot change us

“Dear people”, she caught herself thinking. “My friends

An hour passed with no further thought. And for yet another hour she stood by that long table agleam with gold and silver, nibbling sandwiches, drinking one glass, two glasses, of the champagne Simeon had iced so carefully, till the time came to cut the cake.

Rupert insisted there must be “a spot of discipline” for the cutting of the cake. He made them all gather round in a circle. He showed Dwight just where to insert the long knife and General Frobisher—Charlotte remembers—insisted that the bridegroom’s father ought to make the first speech, but Rupert corrected him, “Speaking with all due deference, sir, that’s the best man’s job”, while Mrs. Marradine, who had drunk three glasses of the Pommery, chuckled in her ear “Nonsense. You ought to do it. This is only another injustice to women”, while Cornelius, fidgeting at his high collar, protested, “The best man, being married himself and therefore out of order, passes back the privilege”.

But Theodore Mansfield—thinking, “Don’t see how I can say a word without dragging in this war, and that wouldn’t be popular because they’re all so determined to forget it—only shook his head; and in the end—John also refused—Rupert made the first speech himself.

Charlotte remembers how fluently Rupert spoke, and the original joke he made, and how young he looked, how gay.

§ 3

The short speeches were over. The cake had been handed round. Outside, the sun still blazed hot on lawn and terrace—crowded now, because bride and bridegroom had gone upstairs to dress.

"Just as though they didn't know what was coming to them", commented Mansfield, surveying the strollers. "But of course they do know. Some of 'em anyway. I've just been talking to Colonel Pettigrew. He's catching the five o'clock to London."

"There's no hope of peace then?" Aurelia spoke in a whisper.

"None that I can see."

"And Dwight?"

"He must go if he wants to . . . After the honeymoon, of course . . . There'll be plenty of time . . . This won't be a short war, unless we come into it."

"You think that's possible, father?"

"Not as things are at the moment. But eventually we may have to. Meanwhile I don't intend to go home."

Despite the sunshine, Aurelia shivered. Her American imagination was working.

"I'm not going to keep Mercy this side a minute longer than I can help", she began. "Supposing there's an invasion."

"There won't be." Her father puffed at his cigar. "The British Navy's as good as mobilized—you can read that between the lines."

Mercy and Maurice came running across the grass. Aurelia managed a smile. Her father asked, "What are you two in such a hurry about?" Maurice, handing him a paper bag, answered, "We've brought you some confetti. Everybody's got to have some. We're fairly going to smother them when they come out"; and ran off again, the child after him.

"I guess", said Mansfield—and it was rare for him to use the Americanism, "that I'll just go and have a last word with the boy."

He went towards the house. Following him, Aurelia encountered John and Philip.

"That was a jolly good speech Dwight made", said Philip. "I liked that little touch about an Anglo-American alliance. You are on our side, aren't you?"

John said, "Don't take any notice of him, Mrs. Vansuythen. He's had too much champagne, and it's making him blood-thirsty".

Philip laughed, "If it hadn't been for the wedding, I should be in camp. Bet that'll be a rag if they declare war tonight. Ball cartridges all round for the dog-potters. We're the boys to defend the Englishman's Home—I don't think".

"Shut up, will you?" John grapped him by the arm. "Here's mother."

"And Uncle George—our complete motorist", chuckled Philip. "I think I'll make myself scarce, otherwise he'll see I've had just one glass too many."

"My brother isn't really tight", explained John quickly. "It's excitement, you know."

He looked at his watch; continued, "Excuse me, there's something I've got to see to", and followed Philip. Charlotte, veering away, called, "They won't be long now, Aurelia".

Upstairs, Theodore Mansfield was just saying, "You must do what you feel to be right, my boy. I shan't try to stop you. But remember you haven't only yourself to think of now. So don't be in too much of a hurry".

Dwight thought, "It's having to tell her that's scaring me", while he answered, "If I don't hurry, we'll be losing our train. But I promise you I won't hurry about the other thing. It wouldn't be fair to Elizabeth".

Father and son shook hands. Watching them from where he stood ready to open the door, Cornelius Vansuythen wondered, "What am I going to do about this war? Just sail for home and pretend it isn't happening?"

Charlotte can still remember how young *he* looked, though there was never much of gaiety about Cornelius, as he followed Elizabeth and Dwight down the stairs.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

§ 1

ANOTHER cloud drifted across the sun as Elizabeth and Dwight came down into the hall. But that omen did not penetrate to Charlotte's mind. Courage still held. Kissing her daughter goodbye, hearing that soft, "You've been so wonderful to us, darling. I can never tell you how grateful I am", only mother love suffused her.

Then Dwight, too, had kissed her; and two lines of people were crowding on bride and groom; and they were through the doorway; and the confetti was raining on them—and they were away, with that old shoe dangling behind the limousine, for the lodge gates and the hill.

John and Philip followed—Philip driving—in Rupert's car. She heard Maurice tell Mercy, "That shoe won't fall off. I tied it on with blood knots. Elizabeth won't half be sick about it"; and Colonel Pettigrew saying to his Gladys, "I think we might be off now, my dear. See if you can find Nan, will you?"

The colonel came up to her, held out his hand, and mumbled a few conventional words. Almost immediately, half a dozen others were making their excuses—among them, the master, who held her fingers for a second longer than usual, before he said, "Let's hope all this'll blow over. Otherwise it'll play the dickens with the hunt. My last season too!"

And that was the exact minute when her courage began to ebb.

She noticed, then, that a shadow had crept halfway across the terrace; that a ghost of a wind shook the tree-geraniums on the stone balustrade. But there was no freshness in that one ghostly puff of wind. Neither did the shadow, when it touched her, bring any relief from the full heat of afternoon.

The exhaust gases from the cars, driven up one by one to

take more and more of her guests away, seemed to make the heat even more oppressive. The smell made her feel a little faint. The faces about her seemed to blur. She could hardly hear the words they spoke, though she knew that she answered them correctly, "Must you really be going, General? I'm so sorry. Won't you stay and have some tea, Joan?"

But by the time her footmen and the hired waiters were carrying tea trays into the Gallery, only the vicar, the Heythrops, and some twenty others remained.

She felt altogether faint by then; glad to be out of the sun, which was shining again, and the warm wind which was tugging at the geraniums; gladder still when the last of the wedding party, a simpering bridesmaid and her gawky parents, asked if their carriage might be sent for.

"I'm tired", she told Rupert then. "I think I'll go up to my room and rest for a little."

"I should if I were you. Bit of a strain, these big dos", said Rupert; and accompanied her to the foot of the stairs.

§ 2

Resting a while, on the sofa by her bedroom window, Charlotte heard John and Philip return. "They've been a long time", she thought vaguely. Then her eyes closed; and, just for a minute, she slept.

A soft knock, the opening of the door, disturbed her. She opened her eyes to see Kate cross the room. Simultaneously every fear against which she had been fighting since dawn stabbed her to complete wakefulness; and she started up, asking, "Is there any news?"

Kate's, "Not that I know of, m'lady. I only came up to see if you wanted me for anything", restored outward calm.

"You might close one of those panes", she said. "And give me a cigarette."

Smoke helped a little; but her knees shook again as she rose from the sofa, and her feet could hardly carry her to the dressing table. Automatically she sat down there; began powdering her face.

"Only makes me look worse", she thought; and at that

second knock she dropped the powder puff onto the glass ashtray; was only just in time to snatch it away from the cigarette.

"Go and see who it is", she said—and never had Kate known her voice so peremptory.

Then John called, "It's only me, mother", and came in, continuing, "I thought you'd like to know they got off all right. Did you see that beastly shoe? It was a good thing Philip spotted it before we got to the station. The train was nearly half an hour late. Otherwise we'd have been back sooner. Something to do with the Territorials, the station master said".

And there he hesitated, biting his lips, before he went on, "It looks as if it were bound to happen. Lucky I haven't paid for my round ticket to Switzerland, isn't it?"

"Yes", said Charlotte slowly. "I suppose it is."

He drew up a chair, and straddled it awkwardly.

"Do you mind if I smoke too?" he asked, looking at her cigarette, which still smouldered in the ashtray; and, without waiting for her answer, took his case from the hip pocket of his striped trousers.

Kate went out, closing the door quietly behind her.

"You heard some news at Laxford?" suggested Charlotte.

"Nothing definite. Just gossip. But everybody seems to think it's a cert; and Philip says——"

"Yes, dear." Again John had hesitated.

"That he wants to go up to London tomorrow."

"Why?"

"To see if he can get into the army. I told him not to be such an ass—after all he isn't eighteen yet—but he says he's going to speak to you about it—so I thought I'd better tell you."

And there John stopped.

His eyes were as steady as ever. But now Charlotte realised the control that he, too, must have been putting on himself throughout the day.

"Aren't we rather rushing our fences?" she asked.

"Philip certainly is." He smiled at her. "And so is somebody else."

The implication seemed obvious. She found herself resent-

ing it ; wondered—for the very first time since she had read that stiff, over-conventional letter with its slightly warmer postscript—if John disapproved of her marriage.

Almost instantaneously, she was on the defensive.

"You forget that Rupert's a professional soldier", she reminded him ; and, off her guard for a moment, "If there is a war, he may have to rejoin his regiment."

"I hadn't forgotten that."

John spoke very slowly. But his next sentences tumbled from him—because the secret hope his mother's words had conjured up seemed so utterly wicked.

"Who's rushing her fences now ?" he said. "It isn't like you to worry, mother. You're not really worried, are you ?"

She wanted to lie. But no word would come through her lips. They only quivered . . . as he stared at her . . . as his right hand moved to her . . . as he laid it on her knee.

"Buck up", she heard him say. "Everything'll be all right. I'm sure it will."

But, even while he still spoke, they heard the telephone bell, ringing and ringing in the hall.

§ 3

John had said, "I expect it's only another wire for Elizabeth". He had run off, "Just to make certain". Charlotte wondered, vaguely, whether she could have asked him to do that, as her feet drove her after him to the door, which he had left open, and out across the landing to the oak rail that guarded the well of the staircase.

She looked down over that rail into the hall.

Herbert and his Louisa, George, and Cornelius Vansuythen were standing near the groined chimney-piece. She knew, instinctively, that they had only just risen from those four chairs. All their heads were turned towards the invisible telephone table. They were listening intently. She heard John's voice. "Wait a minute, please. I'm having him sent for" ; saw Maurice scamper for the morning room.

"Cousin Rupert", shouted Maurice, "it's your telegram.

I was just going to take it down for you, but John stopped me”.

Then she heard Rupert's, “All right, youngster. Don't get so excited”, saw his foreshortened figure lounge, hands in pockets, past the little group by the chimney-piece.

“Captain Whittinghame here”, he said a moment later. “Is that you, Parker? Good man. Read it over, will you?”

Just for a second the very walk he had adopted, the very way he had looked at Louisa, the very nonchalance of his voice told Charlotte—horribly—how much he was enjoying himself, how he was revelling in the drama of this moment, in the limelight it threw on him.

Then, once more, physical love blinded her ; and she could only listen on—each word a separate torture, while her cold hands clawed impotently at the fretted rail.

“Thanks, Parker”, Rupert was saying. “That's quite clear. I'll be with you as soon as I can manage it. Be a good chap and get my uniform case out of the box room. And you might give that revolver of mine a good clean . . . No. I shan't be staying the night. I shall buzz straight down to Aldershot. But you'd better have some supper for me.”

He rang off. Maurice scampered across the rugs to Louisa, crying, “Did you hear? Cousin Rupert's been mobilized. He's going to fight the Germans. Isn't it absolutely topping for him”.

Rupert, still with his hands in his trouser pockets, had followed Maurice. He looked up. He saw her. He made for the foot of the staircase.

Waiting for him, staring down at him, she felt the sharp oak bruise her fingers. At his approach, one last terrible certainty overwhelmed all her consciousness.

“He doesn't love me”, she knew. “He's never loved anybody—except himself.”

§ 4

Rupert had spoken to her. Rupert was touching her, leading her back into her own room.

Charlotte remembered, as he closed the door, that this was the first time he had ever entered this room. She thought,

stupidly, incoherently, "The only time . . . The last time". Then all thought abandoned her as he took her in his arms, and kissed her, and released her again, saying :

"I gather you know what's happened, that I've got my orders, that I'm to rejoin immediately".

"Yes", she heard herself say, "I know that."

He was still close. He put out a hand. He touched her on the shoulder. She felt herself shiver, stiffen.

"You mustn't worry, sweetheart", he went on. "The chances are they won't take me out with them. I'm getting a bit long in the tooth for active service."

For the first time since she had promised to marry him, his slang grated on her.

"Then why have they sent for you?" she asked.

"Well, I am on the reserve list. So naturally, when there's a war——"

"I see."

As though it sensed the coldness behind the interruption, his hand dropped away from her.

"You don't make it too easy for a chap", he grumbled. "After all, it's none of my doing that I've got to go." And suddenly she felt ashamed of herself, all tenderness because he seemed so hurt.

"I'm sorry, dear", she began. "I know that."

But did she really know that? Was Rupert quite the pawn he pretended to be? Why had he been "rather expecting a telegram"? Why had he telephoned to Parker just after breakfast? Why had he given that order, "The moment it comes—open it"? If he loved her, would he be in such a hurry to leave her?

Horribly, she recollected a younger Rupert saying to a younger Charlotte, "My leave's supposed to be up this evening. But as long as I've got you, the squadron can jolly well whistle for me".

He had stayed with her that night. So why not this?

The implication behind that last thought seemed to paralyse all her faculties. She knew that he spoke again, but only an occasional word penetrated to her understanding.

"The country . . .", he said. "Crisis . . . Duty . . ."

But did he really care about the country, or about his duty? Did he really care for anything, or anybody, except himself?

The questions—subconscious though they were—steadied her. One by one, her faculties came back. She could see him plainly now. She could hear every word that he said. And with every word that he said, with every gesture he made, it was as though veils were being torn—one by one—from the eyes of her intellect.

"Acting to you", said her intellect. "Worse than that. Acting to himself. Deluding himself that he's the patriot, because that's so much easier than facing the truth."

And yet, could she herself face the truth—that he was only going to this war for the thrill of it, for the sheer physical excitement?

Besides, would that judgment be quite fair?

Knowing this man—only, had she ever really known this man?—one had to be entirely fair. Loving him—only did she really love him?—one had to be kind.

And would it be kind, even if it were fair—after all one must be fair, "just in all one's judgments"—to strip the veils from the eyes of his intellect?

Could one say to him, "Be straight with me, Rupert. Be straight with yourself. You're going to this war because you want to go to it, because you want the adventure of it. Because you want that more—far more—than you want me"?

No. Neither in fairness nor in kindness, could one say that.

So what could one say, what could one do—except just act, as he was acting, just pretend, as he was pretending, just let him kiss one, and give him back his kisses . . . even though one knew—all the more because one knew—horribly, hopelessly, irretrievably, that these would be almost the last of his kisses.

For that certainty also was overwhelming Charlotte Carteret, and remained with her when—less than an hour later—they all gathered on the terrace to watch Rupert drive away.

§ 5

Rupert leaned over the wheel to pat Maurice's head and grip him by the right hand before he drove away.

Charlotte can still remember that ; and his final words to her, "If they don't take me with them, we'll be married at the old red church before the month's out. If they do, keep your pecker up, because it'll be all over, and you'll be a major's wife, before the New Year's in" ; and the sun just beginning to sink, red between those two heavy clouds at skyline ; and the long shadows of the elm trees just below the terrace ; and the rooks fighting there ; and John slipping his arm through hers, leading her a little apart.

"Let's go for a bit of a stroll, mother", John is saying. "It'll do you good. It's much cooler now. I'm sure the others won't mind if we leave them alone for a bit."

Dear John. My first-born. He knows that I need comfort.

But how long shall I be permitted his comfort ? What was it he told me—such a little time ago—about Philip ?

My John and my Philip.

Over them also—dear God, if You exist, teach me to bear this thing with courage—hangs the Sword.

■

BOOK TWO

POST-WAR

■

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

§ 1

THE old man in the faded blue suit looked over his desk at the young man in the spotless khaki, and said :

"It's straight across this court, sir. The last doorway on your right".

Captain Philip Carteret said, "Thank you so much".

He drew a gunmetal cigarette case from the left hand breast pocket of his tunic, ribboned with the British Military Cross and the French Legion of Honour ; tapped his right-hand side pocket to make sure his matches were there ; laid his brown gloves on the worn wood—and proceeded to light up.

"Do you happen to know if my brother's in ?" he went on.

"I believe so, sir."

"Good."

Spurs clinking, cane under arm, red-banded staff cap cocked slightly to one side, Philip made his way over the cobbles and past Founder's statue. There, two husky men in blue uniform were talking. He caught a scrap of conversation, "Straddled us good and proper. Thought the old whaleboat was for it that time". As he approached the west colonnade, another big man, in the khaki, with five oversea chevrons and a sergeant major's crown on his arm, turned away from a youth in a cap and gown ; clicked heels, and saluted.

Having acknowledge this salute, Philip found himself opposite a black door, lettered, "Sir John Carteret, Bt".

The custom of "sporting one's oak" being unknown to him, he rapped hard on the panels with his cane ; and, receiving no answer, turned the heavy iron handle.

Another door, slightly more modern, faced him. He rapped on that, too. Still no answer. But in a second or so he heard the scrape of a boot sole, a creak of woodwork—

and the inner door was wrenched open to disclose his elder brother, supporting himself with one hand on the frame.

"Didn't expect you so s-oon", said John; and the slight impediment in his speech shocked Philip even more than the change in his appearance since their last meeting, more than a year ago.

John had been in bed then, so that one had not noticed the shortened leg either.

"Poor old chap", Philip said to himself; and aloud, looking at them where they lay by the fireplace, "Let me get you your crutches."

"Thanks. But I can manage without."

Philip tossed cap, gloves and cane on to the seat between the two long windows. John, using the table and the desk as supports, got back to his armchair.

"There's sherry in the c-corner c-cupboard", he went on. "How did you come down? By car, I suppose."

"Yes. I've left it outside. Your porter bloke said it'd be all right there till lunch time. Have a spot?"

"Thanks."

The sherry was from the Manor. So was the silver biscuit barrel.

"Here's how", said Philip. John drank in silence, the glass clinking against his teeth.

"When are you going to be demobbed?" he asked.

"Oh, any day now, I expect."

"That's a pretty doggy pair of fieldboots you've got on."

"Not too bad, are they?"

"How's mother?"

"Oh, she's fine."

Conversation languished. John fished pipe and pouch from his worn jacket. Philip lit another gasper.

"It seems a hell of a time since that day we married Elizabeth off", he said.

"Hell being the operative word."

John put another match to his pipe. The flame showed up the lines on his face, the pallor of it, the grim set of the mouth.

"It was a pity about Rupert", he went on; and fell silent again, thinking, "I didn't really want him to be killed. But I

don't believe he would ever have made mother happy. And, anyway, she's got over it".

Philip said, after a pause, "Funny thing, I was talking about Rupert only the other day, just before I left Cologne, with a bloke who was there when it happened. He told me Rupert was one of the very few chaps he remembered who really liked war . . . But then of course he didn't have very long at it".

"No. *He* only had a couple of months. How about some more sherry?"

"Thanks."

"You might shove some more coal on the fire, too. This blasted college is like an ice house. I wish I'd gone back to my old rooms. My egregious tutor thought the stairs would be too much for me—but at least I shouldn't have been a hundred yards from the nearest insanitary c-convenience."

And, while Philip poured himself another glass of their father's wine, John tucked his crutches under his armpits, and swung himself off.

§ 2

Alone, Philip lounged to the windows and looked out. A March drizzle had begun to fall. The court was empty. He thought of Rupert again. A jolly good fellow. But then, there had been so many of them. No earthly use harking back.

"Got to hark forrard", decided Philip. "Lucky to have got through a couple of years in the trenches with a whole skin. Lucky to have got out of the P.B.I. and on to the staff before that March show. Question is—where do we go for honey now?"

He turned back from the windows; lounged to the fire, and caught sight of himself in the mirror over the mantelpiece.

"Don't look a kid any more", he decided. "Not going to be a kid any more. No ruddy Varsity for me, whatever mother says. Once I've touched my gratuity—me for the States."

He walked to the door, and out of it under the colonnade. Apparently another court led out of this one. Farther still, through a wide archway, he saw a gravel path, trees, the edge of a red brick building. Round the angle of this, after a moment or so, came that crippled shape which was John.

And suddenly Philip caught himself thinking what a damn shame it was about John, who hadn't got a decoration, or even his captaincy—just that scar under his rusty brown hair and that impediment in his speech and those two crutches.

But to express his sympathy—Philip had been realising ever since he first saw that face in the doorway—would be a “bloomer”. Accordingly, with John seated again, he turned the conversation on Elizabeth and Dwight.

He took off his *chapeau*—said Philip—to brother-in-law Dwight. After all, it hadn't been his war when he took that ambulance out to France. And what price joining the French air service afterwards?

“Yes”, admitted John. “A pretty good effort. I saw him just before he and Elizabeth went back to Philadelphia. You know she's going to have another baby, of course?”

“Busy young fellow, our Dwight”, chuckled Philip; then, serious for a moment, “Do you remember my telling you that I wasn't too keen on Cornelius and his Aurelia?”

“Vaguely. Why?”

“Because it's one of the things I've always wanted to take back. If ever a woman turned out trumps, she did. And as for him, if ever a chap died like a hero——”

But there John, with a flash of insensate fury in his brown eyes, interrupted, “Shut up, blast you. C-can't you understand that the last thing I want to be reminded about is your lousy war?”

Philip's blue eyes goggled; but in a moment or so his elder brother's were normal again.

“S-sorry”, he said. “My infernal ser-shell-shock. It takes me like that occasionally. I don't get too much sleep, you know.”

Philip, not knowing what else to say, said, “Quite”; and John put yet another match to his pipe before he continued, “Mother was rather against my coming up again. She wanted me to take it easy. But what I say is, there's nothing like work to take a chap's mind off things. Besides, I've jolly well got to work, unless the Manor's to go to rack and ruin”.

“Come off it”, protested Philip. “We're not as broke as all that.”

He shot back a khaki cuff to examine his wristwatch.

"Time I bought you some lunch", he went on. But John continued to puff smoke through his ragged moustache.

"How much do you know?" he asked.

"Only what you wrote me in your letter and what mother told me last night. It's the bally income tax, isn't it? Six bob in the pound certainly is a bit stiff; but once the old Hun starts paying up his indemnities, we ought to be all right again."

"If you're simple enough to believe all that election gup about searching the Huns' pockets, I don't wonder they made you a staff wallah."

John laughed, not prettily, for the first time that day.

"S-sorry", he repeated. "But it's no use kidding ourselves. And it's no good blaming George for not changing our investments in time. Though Herbert does. Father had a bit of money in Germany, you know. And quite a bit in Russia. That'll go west, too. At least, I imagine so, with all this Bolshevism there."

Again, and for the same reason, Philip said, "Quite". But his eyes goggled once more when John, having supported himself as far as the desk, produced a paper covered with his own neat figures and said:

"Just take a squint at this".

§ 3

Bells had chimed; figures capped and gowned, figures in blue and khaki, were crossing the court on their way to hall, before Philip finished studying that paper; before he admitted, "It certainly looks a bit grim. What are we going to do about it?"; before John said, "I'll tell you one or two ideas I've got while we're having luncheon"; and suggested a wash.

To Philip, the bedroom seemed rather comfortless. He said so; and John laughed, almost in the old fashion, "You always were the sybarite of the family. I remember the way you used to nag mother about having electric light put in at the Manor".

"And steam heat", grinned Philip.

"Well, there isn't much hope of that now, unless I make my fortune as a solicitor."

"You mean as a barrister, don't you?"

"My dear chap. A ber-barrister who c-can't speak two s-sentences without ser-stammering."

"Mother says you'll get over that", said Philip—and could have kicked himself, thinking, "That's my first real bloomer." For had not Charlotte warned him, and only just before he drove away from Montpelier Square, "The less you talk about his health the better. He always resents it. And if there's one thing he resents more than another it's the idea that I talk about him to his doctors".

John's face, however, betrayed nothing of the turmoil in John's mind. He even managed another laugh, as he said, "Mother's always the optimist, bless her", and to refrain from saying, "Keep your hands off me. I don't want any assistance, damn you", when, a few minutes later, Philip helped him up to the driving seat of his car.

"Scrounged her for the day", said Philip. "Never mind how. Had to pay for the petrol though. They're getting rather hot about that sort of thing. She's got a selfstarter too. Marvellous gadget. You watch."

He pressed the knob with his foot, and the engine fired.

"This lunch is on me", said John, still practising that iron selfcontrol which—he had just begun to discover—was the intelligent mind's only refuge from any of those functional disorders the doctors of his day, in their groping ignorance, lumped together under the common heading, "Shell-shock and neurasthenia".

"Never mind who pays for it", chuckled Philip. "The only question before the house is—which pub?"

John, having recently failed to subdue his temper with a perfectly innocent old waiter at the University Arms (it still made him hot to think of the language he had used) chose the Blue Boar. Five minutes past Sidney Sussex and a sharp left-hand turn at the Round Church brought them to King's Gateway and the Great Court of Trinity.

"Jolly", commented Philip. "I'd like to take a look-see inside when we've had our lunch. That's to say if you can manage it."

John said, "Of course I can manage it. I'm not such a crock as all that".

He got out, Philip helping again, and went on, "We'll have a squint at King's, too, while we're about it. And Clare. That's where Maurice wants to go, by the way".

It was the first time he had mentioned Maurice; and to Philip it seemed—somehow or other—as though the old antagonism between those two must have been revived.

"How is the young blighter?" he asked, making the question as casual as possible.

"Troublesome", grunted John. "The only thing he appears to be any use at is cricket. Oh, and drawing—I forgot that.

§ 4

Rain recommenced as the two brothers pushed their way through the doors of the hotel and found a vacant table in the dining room—too crowded for confidential talk.

"The public schools have gone to the devil these last five years", commented John after they had given their order. "No discipline. I suppose it'll come back. But that'll be too late to do Maurice any good. You didn't know he ran away from Harrow and managed to enlist."

"Did he though? That was pretty sporting."

"It depends which way you look at it." And John told the whole story of Maurice's escapade, ending:

"Three weeks without a trace of him. You can imagine the state mother was in. And that isn't the only trouble. I happen to know . . ."

His voice dropped. When he had finished that other story, Philip whistled.

"Does mother know about that?" he asked.

"Good lord, no. She'd have a fit if she did. I only found out by accident."

"You tackled him with it?"

"Yes. But he wouldn't admit anything. Said he was only having a bit of fun with the girl, and what business was it of mine anyway. At seventeen if you please!"

The mouth under the moustache wrinkled in disgust. "Bit

of a Puritan", thought the clean-shaved Philip. "No little jaunts into Béthune or Amiens for him."

Meanwhile John had turned the conversation on Cambridge, also "not what it was".

"They're trying to get things going again", he admitted. "We've had a few debates at the Union. And you may see one or two crews out this afternoon. 'Reviving the Homeric spirit', as some ass called it in the *Review*."

He continued petulant. Everything was in a mess. But what else could you expect? No discipline here either. Too many ex-soldiers and sailors. Always up to some rag or other. Now they were to have a bunch of "wild Americans". Thank goodness, they'd altered some of the old regulations. With any luck, five more terms would see him through. Still, Philip might enjoy it.

"No Cambridge for this nigger", said Philip—and exploded his bomb.

The dining room had cleared by then, except for a Girton girl with an obvious mother, very wrapped up in their own affairs.

"Especially after what you've told me about the money", went on Philip; and a faint flush suffused his browned cheeks as he suggested, "I'm sure I can earn my own living in the States. Old Mansfield'll give me a job in one of his companies. So couldn't you use my little spot of income to keep the Manor going, at least until things improve a bit?"

On which John's eyes, in their turn, goggled; and very strangely—for the very first time he could remember—he felt himself close to tears.

"That's damn decent of you, old chap", he said slowly.

"Floreat Herga", interrupted Philip, taking refuge from his own emotions in sarcasm. "And the old regiment. Seriously, though, we must keep the Manor going. Mother's simply crazy to be back there. That was one of the first things she said to me."

"Agreed." John could hardly have taken longer to speak a complete sentence. "C-carried unanimously."

"Then you'll let me help?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because it won't be necessary."

And, with mother and daughter, each having favoured Philip with a coy glance from the doorway, at last out of the dining room, John Carteret took refuge from his emotions in financial plans.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

§ 1

JOHN's plans impressed Philip as "pretty good". He approved the sale of Montpelier Square—"houses in London, Uncle Herbert says, are fetching fancy prices, and after all mother never used it very much except while the war was on". He approved the sale—"the tenants'll buy 'em all right, they've done their little bit of profiteering these last years, and I can't say I blame 'em"—of the Manor farms.

Philip's other impressions of "the head of the family", however, were not good at all.

Obviously—though John, with the rain stopped, insisted on "walking" all up and down and about Trinity till they came to the bridge—he hated his crutches and was in constant pain. Seated in the car once more, with his face almost as gray as Philip remembered men's faces after battle, he seemed very glad of the suggestion, "I think I've done enough sightseeing for one day, old boy. So let's beetle back to the dear old coll".

"Take him years to get as fit as he used to be—if he ever does", brooded Philip. Yet it was not so much his brother's physical condition which worried him as the state of his brother's nerves.

As they swung to their left into St. Mary Street a van just missed their off wing. John ripped out language which would have brought Canadian recruits to attention and nearly made a passing messenger drop his parcels.

He turned on Philip, too, blazing, "Why the hell can't you be more careful"; and was barely calm again by the time they reached St. Jude's.

There also—with Mrs. Hodges making more of a clatter than usual as she brought the tea things from the narrow scullery—John gave himself away by a nervous twitching of

the lips, by the clenching of his mottled hand on the arm of his chair. And, with the bedwoman pattering off along the stone corridor, he admitted, "I'm as jumpy as the devil these days. It's not being able to get enough exercise".

Shortly after which he turned the conversation—slightly to the surprise of his younger brother—on Nan.

"I suppose you haven't seen her since you got back?" he asked. "She's in London, you know."

"Really." Philip's voice was studiously nonchalant.

"Yes. She's been driving a car for some general or other. But I expect she's lost that job by now. There was some talk about her getting married, I believe. But it never came to anything. Nan's a queer girl, I always think."

"Why?"

"Well, she's twenty-three; and with her looks one would have imagined . . ."

John broke off, gazing into the fire. In the old days Philip would have asked, "Does that mean you're a bit gone on her?" But with his brother in his present state, it seemed best not to chaff.

"I suppose her father's death has cut her up pretty badly", he said. "It seems a bally shame that a chap of his age should go all through the war and then get snuffed out by this beastly influenza."

John, in his turn, said, "Quite"; and returned to the family finances until it was time for Philip to go.

§ 2

Dusk found Philip twenty miles away from Cambridge. Traffic was sparse. Switching on his electric headlamps he let the scrounged car rip, and made the outskirts of town before half-past six.

The lights—grand, to see London with all her lights on again!—pleaded for a binge. Why not ring up that girl he'd met on his last leave—he'd got her number written down in his notebook—and ask her to join him at Murray's? Or they might do a show? That American play at the Haymarket ought to be just his line of country.

What about mother, though? Life must be pretty grim for mother nowadays with nobody to keep her company except Lollie.

So Philip, having returned the Vauxhall to its military stable, took a taxi to Montpelier Square.

Ellen—unchanged by the war years except for a few more threads of gray under her cap—opened the door to him. His mother—said she—was in the morning room. Would he be dressing for dinner?

“What in?” laughed Philip, who had spent most of the previous day at his tailor’s; then, just touching her on one shoulder, “Don’t you worry. I’ll get out my own slacks.”

Ellen disappeared through the door to the basement. An envelope on the hall table caught his eye. His heart gave a little jump as he recognised the American stamp and read the printed, “Mansfield Utilities, Inc., 1131 North Broad Street, Philadelphia, Pa”.

“Dwight hasn’t wasted any time”, he thought. But the phrasing of Dwight’s typewritten letter annoyed him, especially the last sentence, “I’ll go into conference with father as soon as he gets back and write you more by next mail. He’s making quite a trip out west at the moment”.

Philip stuffed the single sheet into one of his side pockets, and opened the morning room door.

Charlotte sat at her desk. During the war, she had bobbed her hair. He was still unsure of his approval. Somehow or other, the new style made her look a little too mannish. Her clothes, too—it struck him as she rose from her writing—were a bit too severe, hardly a change from the uniform she had been wearing on his last leave.

And although she was still supremely beautiful, he had the impression—as she moved forward from the doorway—that her beauty had aged by very much more than five years since the day of Elizabeth’s wedding.

“Well”, she asked, “and how’s John?”

He hesitated over his answer. She went on quickly, “I gather you were rather shocked. Did he do much grousing?”

“I didn’t find him”, admitted Philip. “precisely gay.”

Charlotte laughed. An older man might have perceived the protective hardness behind that laughter.

"I saw you had a letter from Dwight", she continued. "What did he have to say for himself?"

"Oh, nothing very important." Philip's ambitions were still a secret from his mother. "Just an answer to one of mine. Did Elizabeth write?"

"Yes. Perhaps you'd like to see it."

"Thanks."

She handed him his sister's letter; sat down again and went on with her work. Dwight—Philip was glad to read—had obviously not told Elizabeth he wanted to join them in America.

"She seems happy enough", he said. "Their new house sounds as though it would be a humdinger by the time it's finished."

"A what?"

"Humdinger! Good show. Fine place."

"Thank you for the translation, dear." And again Charlotte laughed, as she had been teaching herself to laugh, until it was almost second nature, ever since that morning when she had met the boy on his red bicycle halfway between the lodge gates and the terrace, knowing, even before she opened the telegram, that Rupert must have been killed.

In a regimental frame on her desk, there stood a photograph of Rupert, the last ever taken—at Aldershot just before he went to the front. Willy nilly, she glanced up at it; glanced away again—mocked, as always, by that touch of pride, of scorn, of nonchalance, about the mouth, about the hand on the sword hilt, about the eyes.

"Weakness", she said to herself. "We could never have been really happy"; and, aloud, "If you want a cocktail, you'd better attend to it."

"What about you and Lollie?"

"Laura's not coming home for dinner. But I'll have one. And a cigarette."

She lit a Sullivan from the silver box he handed her; finished and sealed her letter to Elizabeth while he filled and manipulated the shaker.

"Aren't you going out with one of your young women?" she asked. "Or have you left your heart in Cologne with a Rhine maiden?"

"Nothing doing in that direction so far", chuckled Philip. "At least nothing serious."

"Taking your fun where you find it", quoted his mother—and, once more, she laughed.

§ 3

There was no photograph of Rupert in Charlotte's bedroom. Yet the memory of that pride, of that scorn, that nonchalance haunted her while she dressed.

Long ago now, she had given up sentimentalising about Rupert. That she had loved him in a way she could never love any other man, nevertheless, seemed definite. Because she might so easily have married again, had she so chosen, during these last years.

"Three honourable proposals", she thought; "and", cynically, "heaven knows how many dishonourable ones."

The casual amourettes of war time, however, had offered no temptation. Work was the surer anodyne, whether against her grief for Rupert, or her fears for John and Philip. And into work she had flung herself, like the rest of her kind.

"Doing my bit?" she wondered, cynical again. "The women were splendid."

But how some of the women—herself included—were already missing their uniforms, and their titles ("Good morning, Commandant. Good evening, Commandant. My boy's got a blighty, can I have leave to visit him in hospital, Commandant?"), their wards and their messes and their camps.

"Got to get over that", decided Charlotte. "Lots more work for me. Lots to think about. Reconstruction."

The latest catch-phrase! True enough though—in her case at any rate. For if one other personal circumstance appeared definite, it was that the ease, the certainty, the comfort of her own pre-war existence would never return.

She finished her dressing with a thought for Kate, left like Simeon to "keep an eye on the Manor", still in use as a

convalescent hospital—and went slowly downstairs. The closed door of the drawing room reminded her of that Sunday when Dwight had called to ask if he might be engaged to Elizabeth.

“Grandmother!” she brooded, cynical again, refusing to admit how much she missed Elizabeth and those two mites of girls who had accompanied her to the States. “With my companion. My faithful Laura. Why didn’t I get rid of the woman?”

More weakness. She ought to have given Laura notice the day after Elizabeth’s wedding.

“I meant to”, she remembered. “But somehow I just let it drift.”

Philip, before her in the morning room, drove away memories.

“I’ve just been talking to Uncle Herbert”, he said. “He wanted to know if he could come round after dinner. I said he could. That was all right, wasn’t it?”

Charlotte nodded. Ellen announced dinner; served soup, and departed.

“John’s been breaking to me”, announced Philip, “that we’re rather hard up. So I thought I’d relieve his mind of one anxiety. *I’m* not going to the Varsity.” And after a little amateur finessing he told her of his correspondence with Dwight.

“Do you approve?” he asked.

“Is my approval necessary?” she countered.

He looked up at his father’s picture. She thought, “It’s the same voice. There’s a likeness about the shape of the head. John could be resolute, too. When he’d made up his mind about anything”.

“No”, admitted Philip, pinching his khaki tie. “But I should hate not to have it.”

Her mood softened. She thought again—that he’d really grown quite handsome, that he’d won the Military Cross and the Legion of Honour, that he’d been mentioned in dispatches. Yet at the same time she knew that she had never cared for him quite as much as the others; and, wondering why, became selfconscious.

"I didn't stop you from going to the war when you were very little more than Maurice's age", she began. "So why should I try to stop you from going to America?"

The answer satisfied him. Boyish, he grew first confidential, then optimistic.

"I mean to make at least a million dollars before I'm forty", he was telling her when Herbert Carteret poked his head round the door to ask, "Am I in time for the port?"

§ 4

Towards the end of nineteen-fifteen Herbert Carteret had breezed his way, not without certain misgivings for his practice, into one of the obscurer ministries. Recently he had breezed his way out again with a considerably increased clientèle and the prospect of a decoration.

Philip observed the gray in his moustache, the incipient baldness, the increase in the girth line as they shook hands.

He filled a glass. Herbert sat down; and emptied it.

"No more, my boy", said Herbert. "I just looked in to talk over a bit of business with your mother. Do you mind if I put a cigar on, Charlotte?"

"Of course not."

"Good." He took out his case. "Have one, my boy?"

"Thank you, sir. But I don't smoke them."

"Pity." And Herbert, without more ado, went on, "I've got you an offer for this house. If you take my tip you'll say yes before the fellow has time to think better of it. Everybody's quite crazy at the moment. They're throwing their money about as though it were water".

"But doesn't this house", queried Charlotte, "belong to John?"

Herbert admitted that it did, "as far as the legal position goes". He continued, however, pressing. The fellow wanted his answer by ten o'clock in the morning. John mightn't reply in time, though he'd been asked to telegraph. Supposing his, Herbert's, letter didn't arrive in Cambridge by the first post?

"What does George think?" hedged Charlotte.

"As usual"—her brother-in-law laughed, waving his fat cigar—"George can't make up his mind to part."

He left it at that—and his sister-in-law in a quandary.

"John's difficult these days", she said. "He mightn't like it if I interfered."

"Couldn't we get him on the phone?" suggested Philip.

"He hates that." Charlotte spoke again. "It means the best part of a hundred yards on his crutches."

"Then why not take the risk, mother? I know he wants this house sold. He told me so this afternoon."

"That's what I'd do if I were you, Charlotte", urged Herbert, with an approving glance at his nephew.

And finally they persuaded her, though slightly against her will.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

§ 1

HERBERT CARTERET stayed to the end of his cigar. His nephew accompanied him to the hall door.

"What are your plans, my boy?" he asked; and, having been told them in brief, he breezed, "Business, eh. America. Well, you might do worse. You might do very much worse", before his car carried him off to his club.

Philip, after reporting this to his mother, again at her desk in the morning room, commented, "What I like about Uncle Herbert is that he's got brains".

"But no heart", said Charlotte, off her guard for a moment.

Her second son thought the remark over—and their intellects met for the first time.

"That's jolly clever of you", he said. "Of course you're absolutely right. I wonder I never spotted it before."

The flattery pleased. She finished her short letter to John, and asked Philip to ring for Ellen.

"I'll buzz it in the box for you", he said. "No need for the old dear to get her feet wet."

Again her mood softened. Flashingly she considered, "I believe I'm just as fond of him as I am of the others. Only I don't know him so well. He's been away from me so much. He's grown up without me".

"May as well do the job right away", he continued; and, taking the letter, went out.

Alone, she gave him more thought. Pride in his achievements touched her again, and something of regret. He was going away, like Elizabeth. She would never be really intimate with him. The war had separated them before true intimacy could ripen. But supposing there had been no war? Supposing she had married Rupert? Could there have been any real intimacy with any of her children then?

The questions—though her intellect had answered them many and many a time during the last four and a half years—annoyed her. It was no use harking back after imaginary foxes. She had been luckier than tens of thousands of mothers—with John only crippled, with Philip and Maurice still alive.

Philip returned, with a whiskey and soda he had poured for himself in the dining room, to find her still pensive.

"Worrying about the little deal?" he asked.

"No, dear." She hesitated a moment. "Aren't you drinking rather a lot?"

Her question seemed to surprise him.

"I don't think so", he said; and for the second time their intelligences met when he suggested, "I expect you find it a bit difficult to realise that I'm not a kid any more."

"Probably", she admitted, smiling, as she had not smiled for a long time now, and with a new warmth beginning to creep about her heart.

The drink made him talkative. Deliberately she led him on. He opened up about some of his war experiences; confessed how frightened he had been when he "went over the top".

"Nearly everybody was", he said. "But of course one didn't let on about it at the time."

Ellen, entering to ask if she might go to bed, stopped the flow of his reminiscences. Soon their conversation returned to John.

"I'm jolly worried about the old chap", he confessed. "He seems so disgruntled. Do you think he'll get over it?"

"Yes. I'm sure he will."

"But aren't you worried?"

"Of course." A strange sentence came, unbidden, from her heart to her lips, "But then that's one of my main maternal functions".

"You mustn't let him take it out of you too much."

"I don't." More unbidden words had their way with her. "Besides, he's been so wonderful. You can't imagine how much pain he's had. And it isn't over yet. There'll have to be another operation."

"You've been pretty wonderful yourself", interrupted

Philip; and went on very quickly, hoping she had not perceived that involuntary glance at Rupert's photograph, "About Maurice, I mean. Fancy his running away from Harrow like that. With the war as good as over, too. By the way, why didn't you mention it in any of your letters to me?"

Charlotte hesitated another moment.

"For the same reason I didn't say very much about John's wound", she admitted finally. "Because I thought you had quite enough troubles out there."

They kissed before they went upstairs to bed; but, after they had separated on the upper landing, he knocked on her bedroom door and came in.

"I've just been thinking", he said diffidently. "Perhaps it would be better if I didn't go to the States, at any rate for the present. I could get some sort of a job in England, I suppose."

She wanted, very desperately, to say, "That's what I'd like you to do. You might be such a companion. John isn't—because he's too unhappy. Maurice isn't—because he's too young and too selfish".

Instead she only laughed, "Altruism, Philip?"

He stared at her, and flushed scarlet.

"Yes", he said—after a long pause.

"The selfsacrifice"—once more she managed to laugh—"is appreciated, but not acceptable. Go your own way, my dear. Make your fortune."

His instinct was to say, "Mother, you're a ruddy marvel". What he actually said was, "When I do, we'll share it".

Which amounted to the same thing.

§ 2

The moment had been too emotional. Alone, Charlotte experienced something of reaction. Ever since Rupert's death, she had been learning to recontrol herself. Life wasn't sentimentality. Life was proportion, balance, common sense.

Stressing this, patting herself on the back for her refusal to accept Philip's selfsacrifice, she began to undress. Presently she heard Laura Marston on the doorstep, her key turning, her feet on the staircase. And again memories assailed her—

of Laura, bursting into tears at the sight of that telegram from the War Office, of herself saying, "Don't be a fool, woman. If I can keep a grip on myself, surely you can".

Yet it was Laura, such a sight in her uniform, who had said, "Don't worry. They wouldn't be bringing him back to England if his life were in any danger", when the wire came about John.

She finished her undressing, and climbed into bed.

Half an hour with a book before sleeping was still her habit. But tonight—she realised abruptly—no printed word would hold her mind. Philip's decision, the impending sale of this house, had cleared the way for constructive thought. She knew where she was now. Three main problems faced her—the first being where to live.

"The Manor?" she wondered. "Even if we sell the farms that'll mean quite a lot of pinching and scraping. Still—the place must be kept up."

Her thoughts switched to the second problem—John, still determined to take honours in both parts of the law tripos before joining George and Herbert. Could she return to the Manor, and leave him alone?

Confusion followed, and something of annoyance. Why was John so stubborn? If only he would come to live at the Manor with her.

"We could just manage", she decided. "After all, he's never been extravagant. And it'd be so much better for him."

But the consideration of John's health, bringing back emotion, drove out annoyance. And in another moment she knew herself close to tears.

Why couldn't her first-born have come back from the war as Philip had come back from it—whole, cheerful, normal? For in some ways—let the doctors call it shell-shock if they liked—John was not quite normal. He'd lost his sense of balance, of proportion. He couldn't keep his temper under control. One never knew where one stood with him. One always had to be finessing with him, gentling him.

"His intelligence and mine", brooded Charlotte, "never meet. I still love him, but I can't get near him. He shuts himself away from me."

And from that, baffled and miserable, her thoughts turned to their third problem, Maurice, due to leave Harrow within the year.

Consideration of her youngest, though frequently pleasurable, always made Charlotte a little nervous. Selfishness apart—after all it was natural enough for youth to put its own desires first—there must be some queer streak, maybe some throwback to a remote ancestor, in Maurice. His very popularity seemed to prove that.

John and Philip had gone through Harrow much in the same way as their father must have done, inconspicuously, making few friends if many acquaintances. Whereas Maurice, in the Head's own words—spoken when she had brought him back after that escapade in the army—was "an influence, though not altogether, I'm afraid, for good".

"And yet", mused Charlotte, "in many ways he's so lovable ; he's so handsome ; he's so . . . fascinating."

On which, just for the fraction of a second, memories tried to assail her once more ; and she grew conscious, as it were of a ghost materializing, of that first real fear . . .

§ 3

. . . Nevertheless—because the passage of years had held so much of real terror—there was no actual materialization of that particular fear ; and presently Charlotte slept, long and dreamlessly, to wake refreshed, to hear Philip singing, "Now we've wound up the watch on the Rhine", as he splashed in the bathroom, to muse, "Things might have been so much worse. They might never have come back to me. We might have been completely ruined".

For all that, of course, was true. Just as it must be true—only sometimes one couldn't help doubting the doctors—that John's tempers, John's "state of inhibition", as the latest phraseology called it, were only temporary ; that his mind would heal with his body, given the requisite time.

"It's only a question of time", she told Philip, once more expressing his anxiety, over breakfast ; and, just before they

finished, as though to prove how right she was, John telephoned, apparently in the highest spirits, to say :

"I've just had a letter from old Herbert. He's got a jolly good offer for the house. If you approve I'm all for accepting . . . You are. Splendid. Then be an angel and ring up C. and C. for me. They want to know by ten o'clock and this line's the very devil. Besides, it'll make me late for my lecture".

"Rather", added John, in answer to Charlotte's inquiry, "I'm feeling like a two-year-old this morning."

So that, once again, she found herself smiling ; once again she experienced that new warmth at her heart, as she returned to the table, as she sat talking with Philip and Laura. Nor did this new mood of happiness desert her when Laura went off to do the shopping and Philip to "ginger up that tailor of mine about my mufti".

§ 4

During the week which followed, moreover—or so at least it seemed to Charlotte's imagination—she put the last haunt of Rupert away.

It was over four years—she told herself—since his death. Useless, therefore, to think about him any longer. Her love for him had never been of that fine quality which outlasts the grave, and anticipates the resurrection. Besides, she had no faith in the resurrection.

And his love for her ?

"Not even as strong as mine", she decided ; and, as though for ultimate revelation, "Our marriage, for him, would have been just a minor adventure. He would have tired of it within the year."

This last revelation damaged self-esteem. To deny it, however, seemed as useless as it had been to deny the first revelation, that grim thought which had formulated itself, more than four years ago, while she still stared at the telegram, "Perhaps this is for the best".

It was for the best. Marrying Rupert, her love—no—one mustn't jib at a word, her passion—for him might, would, must have come between her and her children.

Yet although this laid the haunt of Rupert, the puzzle of his character remained.

So much good there had been in the man. Never a cruel thought. Never even an unkind one. A sense of humour, too. And a physical courage—witness that walk up the hill with a broken leg, witness his colonel's letter: "He was magnificent. He saved the situation".

What, then, could have been the flaw?

"Weakness?" wondered Charlotte. "Lack of balance? Lack of moral courage?"

So wondering she dismissed the puzzle, except for one thought, "He was very human. Too human, perhaps, for you".

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

§ 1

CHARLOTTE'S suspicion that she might be a little inhuman—a little out of sympathy with the foibles, the weaknesses, the sentimentalities of her fellows—did not penetrate very deep. She had too much with which to occupy herself—that March and April—for introspection.

The sale of the house in Montpelier Square, completed with almost illegal haste by the anxious Herbert, entailed a hundred and one petty decisions. Some pieces of furniture—all of it, George disclosed, hers under a forgotten marriage settlement—must be warehoused until they could be moved to the Manor. The rest, she decided to auction.

This separation of Chippendale sheep from Tottenham Court Road goats took many hours. Item, there were masses of papers to be scrutinised; the silver must be sent to her London bank; and the purchasers—to whom she took a frantic dislike—harried her daily with requests to “have a look round” with their plumber or their electrician or their interior decorator.

In the middle of which, Maurice came home for the Easter holidays; John went into hospital for another operation; Laura's only sister had a stroke (“I'm terribly sorry to leave you when you're so busy but I simply must go to the poor thing”); and Philip received a cable, “Everything fixed Dwight”.

She accompanied Philip, with the auction actually in progress, to the station; and caught herself wondering—his kiss still on her lips and the train gliding away—just how much he or the others really cared.

“Girls marry”, she thought in that moment. “Boys have to make their own lives. So who would be a mother?”

And back again at the house—full of the strangest people, all apparently with money to burn—she caught herself thinking with a peculiar poignancy, of “the other John”.

The other John’s picture had been warehoused. But one could still see—as one stood alone in the dining room with the murmur of the auctioneer’s voice just audible from the first-floor landing—exactly where it had hung. The wallpaper there was almost unfaded. One remembered choosing that Morris pattern and the other John’s, “I never pretended to have much taste, my dear. So go your own way”.

In so many things—in all the minor things—he had let her go her own way. A good husband. None better. A good companion, too, within his limitations. Pity—such a pity!—he had been drowned.

Surprised at the quirk her thoughts had taken and vaguely selfreproachful (because it seemed so long since she had even troubled to remember the other John?) Charlotte turned to see Maurice standing in the doorway.

“Got rather bored at the hotel”, he said. “Thought I’d just stroll over and see if we were making any money. It’s getting on for lunch time you know. How would you like to stand me a really good feed at the Berkeley?”

“Why particularly the Berkeley?”

“Why not? It’s one of the best places, isn’t it?”

“You seem to forget we’re *en pension* at our own hotel.”

“I say, you’re getting as bad as John about the spondulicks.”

Spondulicks! Where could he have picked up, who had she last heard using, the Victorian word?

Once more, just for the fraction of a second, that first real fear tried to materialize from the subconscious mind of Charlotte Carteret. Just for another split of a second, it seemed to her that she saw ladders—painters’ ladders—through the open doorway.

Then all she saw was Maurice, tall as a full-grown man, smiling at her with those lips on which the down was still unshaved.

What a handsome fellow these last years had made of her youngest. How little one noticed that old scar under his left eye. How charming he could be—when it suited him.

"Be a sport, mother", he coaxed. "After all I am supposed to be having a holiday."

"Very well, my dear. As you insist."

§ 2

"Wonder why she called me 'my dear'", mused Maurice, handing his mother into a taxi. "Distinctly unusual. She must be in one of her best moods today. But I can always get round her, even when she goes all Gertrude."

The recollection of his grandmother's letter, written just after he had been "yanked out of the army", made him smile. The old woman had written him a "regular stinker", all about discipline, and what a young man owed to his school, to his family. She'd been jolly proud of him, though. She'd confessed as much in that postscript, "Of course I realise you thought you were doing your patriotic duty".

Mother had been rather proud of him too. But not John. Confound John. Such an old stick. Still, one ought to be sorry for the chap. And in a way one was.

Thought became inconsequent, excitement grew on him, as they made Piccadilly.

"What are we going to eat?" he asked. "Can I have a cocktail?"

"Certainly not. It's bad enough that you should have started smoking."

Poor dear mother. How innocent she was. Did she really imagine he'd never drunk a Bronx or a Martini? Best humour her, though.

"All right, if you don't think they're good for me. I say, here we are."

He jumped out; gave her his hand; said, "I'll go and see about a table", and left her to settle with the driver. Following him towards the restaurant, Charlotte found herself face to face with Nan.

It was the best part of two years since she and the girl had met. Expecting her to be in mourning for her father, Charlotte experienced something of a shock at the short tartan skirt, the conspicuous jumper. Nan's make-up, too—

though one realised how much it improved her appearance—displeased.

They stood talking for a minute or so. Nan asked after John.

"The poor darling", she ejaculated at the news he was in hospital. "I *must* send him some flowers. Do you think he'd like me to go and see him?"

She extracted a little notebook from her shiny leather bag and took down the name and address of the hospital. Maurice loafed up and greeted her with effusion.

"I suppose you're with a party", he said.

"Only one party", laughed Nan. "But he's in the city, worse luck. They always are nowadays."

She hesitated, looked at Charlotte.

"If you weren't so young", she went on to Maurice, "I'd ask you to take me dancing afterwards."

Maurice flushed. Charlotte said, with just a touch of acerbity, "Don't let his youth deter you. I believe he's quite a competent performer".

The light blue eyes under the plucked brows and the newly darkened lashes hardened for a second. Then Nan said, "Well, I'll think about it. Bye-bye for the present", and drifted away.

Maurice's gaze followed her admiringly. It would be jolly good fun, he thought, to take Nan to a *thé dansant*. But an instinct beyond his years warned him that he'd better not say so to his mother. If she once got the idea he was keen on girls . . .

A waiter, signalling that their table was ready, saved him from further talk about Nan.

"We'd better hurry up", he said, "or someone else may bag it"; and, once seated, applied his mind to the menu, which he made the waiter translate.

"They ought to teach us better French at Harrow", he grumbled, after the man had taken their order. "It makes one look such a fool not to know the names of things. If I didn't want to get my Blue so badly, I'd much rather go abroad than to Cambridge. But I suppose I can do that afterwards."

"And how about earning your living?" suggested Charlotte.

"But that's just the point. Don't you see, if I'm going to be a painter, I shall simply have to study in Paris. They always do. And I think that's what I'd better be. Because it's no earthly use my trying for the army now. Even if I do manage to scrape in, there won't be another war for ages. Besides, John says I shan't have enough money for the Guards or the cavalry, and I should loathe to be in a line regiment."

"Isn't that rather snobbish of you?"

"Cousin Rupert always used to say——" began Maurice.

But there he came to a full stop, flushing his brightest scarlet as he thought, "I oughtn't to have mentioned him. I may have hurt her", and faltering, "Perhaps it is a bit snobbish of me. But I'd just as soon be in business as in the line. By jove, isn't this lobster mayonnaise good? Are you going to see John after we've had lunch?"

"Not till five o'clock", said Charlotte; and, realising, sympathising with his embarrassment, "You needn't come with me if you'd rather go dancing with Nan. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"Well, I shouldn't mind. It'd be something to do anyway."

He concentrated on his food. The band broke into a new tune. A man at the next table began, "You mark my words, old chap—we're still a long way from settling the Peace Conference".

Listening with half an ear to the words and the music, Charlotte thought, "I suppose they don't really care for girls when they're that age. How sensitive he is underneath. Blushing like that. As though there were any reason why he shouldn't mention Rupert".

Yet the trivial incident had perturbed her, though she could not imagine why. Just as it perturbed her—though there also imagination gave her no clue to the reason—when Nan, all smiles, came over to them while they were drinking their coffee.

"You won't forget to give John my love and ask him if he'd like to see me, will you, Lady Carteret?" said Nan; and, laying a hand on Maurice's shoulder, "Can you spare this one

for the afternoon? I promise you I'll take the greatest care of him."

§ 3

Nan took Maurice away almost immediately—because she had "a spot of shopping to do before we tread the light fantastic"—leaving Charlotte alone.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

§ 1

Meanwhile John Carteret, also alone, lay sleepless in his high narrow bed.

For a wonder, he was completely out of pain ; and his mind seemed to be functioning as normally, as calmly, as it had been wont to in the days before the war.

He found himself, as of old, taking pleasure in little things—in the scent of the spring roses his mother had brought him yesterday, in the sight of new leafage just outside the hospital window, in the chirp of the London sparrows.

After all, his wounds might have been far worse. He might easily have been blinded. And a chap had to do his duty by his country, whether he liked it or not.

"Got to go on doing my duty, too", decided John.

He closed his eyes, and permitted himself some of the dreams which had inspired his boyhood. Why shouldn't he become a great reformer, like his idol, Lord Shaftesbury ? The survivors among those men he had done his best to command needed sympathy, understanding, guidance. They weren't going to be satisfied with the old semi-feudal England, with the old wages, the old conditions. They wanted, they deserved, a better England.

Grand fellows, all of them—if not too wise.

It was chaps like himself who must be wise, who must be steady, who mustn't let themselves get into panics, into tempers . . .

Easy enough, though, to make good resolutions when one was lying comfortably in bed.

The consideration of his present comfort proved somehow distressing. He opened his eyes again ; thought, with more than a touch of desperation, "What's the use ? As soon as

they let me out I shall get into the same old rages. I'm a permanent cripple. I can hardly open my mouth without stammering. I'm no use to anybody".

But the mood shamed him. He began to wrestle with it—and succeeded in holding despair under till the sister brought in his afternoon tea.

He rather disliked this particular sister. She was so very large, and so horribly hearty, and so proud of her trench vocabulary.

"Four pip emma", she said. "And all the dixies on the boil. I've got umpteen of you to attend to this afternoon. So cheerio for the present."

And he had to re-arrange his pillows, to pull the wheeled table a little closer, for himself.

The tea, however, was piping hot ; and they'd been quite free with the butter. He emptied the pot, and both plates ; lit a gasper ; looked at his wristwatch ; picked up Walker's *Manual of International Law*, and was still deep in study when the sister swept in again to announce, "Here's your mother come to inspect us. Shall I get you a spot of tea, Lady Carteret ?"

"That", said Charlotte, "sounds very acceptable" ; and sat down by the bed.

§ 2

John had expected his mother to bring Maurice ; and felt rather relieved—as he put down his book and the pad on which he had made his various notes—that they should be alone.

"Is the auction over ?" he asked.

"Just."

"How did it go ?"

"Marvellously. I feel quite a rich woman."

She told him some of the prices ; and, when he expressed astonishment, "The auctioneer says it's because the shops simply can't get things. They're not being made yet. He told me that if I had any jewellery I wanted to get rid of, this was *the* time to sell it".

"But you're not going to do that, are you ?"

"Well—I might. Some of it's very old-fashioned, you know."

"Father——" began John; but stopped with the nurse at the door.

"You think he would have disapproved", prompted his mother once they were alone again.

"I'm sure he wouldn't have liked it."

"But we're not in a position to do just what we like any more."

She poured out her tea. Watching her in silence, all John's well-being seemed to go. His inhibitions were on him again. Every nerve in his body felt aquiver. He managed to control his body, but not his thoughts.

"Why can't we talk about anything except money?" ran his thoughts. "We used to be such jolly good pals. Only something went wrong. Years ago. I wonder if she ever guessed. No. She couldn't have. Because I never let on—even after he was killed. I wish I could, though. It's rotten bottling things up. It might make all the difference".

"Don't you hate it?" he asked, after a long pause.

As he spoke there came to Charlotte yet another memory, of his arm round her, and a walk they had taken afterwards, and standing with him, in such a different silence, to watch the shadows lengthening across purple and yellow arabis towards that red brick wall where the peaches grew, and running with him, downhill to the bridge across the sunk garden. So that she would have given the world to say, "I'd rather be without a shilling if we could just be as we used to be", instead of laughing, still with that touch of hardness underlying the laughter:

"Not as much as all that".

"But you do hate it", persisted John after another pause.

"And you don't like my going on with my law either."

"Have I ever said so?"

"No." His brown eyes were direct. "Not since I . . . c-came back."

He had stammered for the first time that afternoon. Impulsively she put out a hand to him.

"It's ner-ner-necessary now", he went on. "You see that, don't you? And it does me g-good to work. It keeps my mind off things."

"What things?" She spoke lightly. "Money? You really mustn't worry about that all the time. We shall still have enough to live on. Even George thinks we ought to get quite good prices for the farms once we decide to offer them to the tenants."

John's eyes were still direct; but something told her that he had scarcely listened, that his mind was still continuing its own processes; and, in a moment or so, she felt the arm on which her hand lay begin to tremble.

"Not mer-mer-money", he stammered. "Mer-mer-myself."

Speech failed him—and her too. Subconsciously each heard the jar of the ascending dinner lift, a patient's door closing, feet along the passage. Consciously they only heard each other's breathing, the pump and beat of their own hearts.

"Myself." Abruptly John spoke again—to Charlotte's surprise without the faintest trace of stammer. "You see, I've simply got to keep my mind off myself. Because I'm such a complete idiot. Because I worry so. Because everything seems to worry me. Especially . . ."

He broke off. She knew that she was holding his arm very tightly.

"Go on", she heard herself say.

"You", muttered John—and averted his eyes.

A psychiatrist of the after years might have diagnosed the fixation. A weaker son might have given way—a weaker mother unmanning him—to the emotional crisis, to the need for tears.

But neither weakened; and presently Charlotte said, very quietly, still holding him, "I don't understand. Tell me".

"If only I could", began John—and something in his voice brought back Elizabeth, in those hideous school clothes, saying, "It makes one frightfully selfish. It's made me feel—oh—beastly. All wrong with myself".

His eyes, too, reminded her of Elizabeth's, when he looked at her again, when he continued, "But things'll never be right between us until I do. So you'd better know. It's about . . . Rupert. I never wanted you to marry him. I

always loathed the idea. And when he was killed, I . . . I couldn't even be sorry about it. Though I ought to have been . . . if only for your sake. Because you loved him so much. You did, didn't you. You still"—he stammered again, very horribly, the difficult word gurgling in his throat—"mer-mer-mer-miss him".

And with that he fell silent, though his eyes—their pupils contracting and dilating with every heart beat—clamoured for the truth.

The truth? It would serve. It was all this sick son needed from her. Yet how brutal, the mere truth. How disloyal to the memory of one in whom there had been so much good, and so much courage. Moreover, one had one's own pride.

"Isn't it natural for me to miss him?" asked that pride.

But on that, as once before, Charlotte's intuition told her how much hung on the next few moments.

"Our whole lives", she knew; and almost at once she was using the very words she had used, seven long years ago, to the schoolgirl Elizabeth:

"Aren't you blaming yourself unnecessarily? We can none of us help our feelings. The best we can do is try not to let them influence our behaviour".

For what seemed an eternity, John continued to stare at her. Then he said, and she could see how carefully he chose each word:

"At least, I never did that. And I never would have. On my honour, I never would have".

His meaning was as clear as his speech. A great rush of tenderness overwhelmed her.

"The real chivalry", she thought. "His father's."

Yet even that thought could not make her wholly weak.

"As though there were any need to tell *me*", she said.

And on that they were smiling at each other after the old fashion; on that she had risen, had kissed him, lightly, on the forehead, whispering:

"Wash it out, my dear. I'm never any good at——"

"Sob stuff?" John whispered back.

And suddenly each was shaken by that laughter which, with some natures, can take the place of tears.

§ 3

Once again, nevertheless, the moment had been too emotional for Charlotte. She was glad when the surgeon came, when John said, "You'd better be running away now"; glad to be in the fresh air.

"Out of our depths", she thought. "Both of us."

For a little—walking rapidly—she wondered if she would not have done better to tell John the brutal truth.

And yet, how could one have told the truth; how could she have confessed to her own son, "I don't miss Rupert. I never really loved him. I was only fascinated—physically"?

As well confess how, long ago, the best part of twenty years . . .

But there introspection came to a dead end; and she recollected—her mind relieving itself with trivialities—that she had omitted to ask John if he would like a visit from Nan.

Probably—she imagined—John would like to see Nan. After all, they'd known each other since they were children. The girl's company would cheer him up. She wasn't a bad sort. Perhaps a little too modern. But one must make allowances. Things had changed. Plenty of young women in one's own class used lipsticks, blacked their eyelashes.

"I mustn't let myself go pre-war", decided Charlotte; and so reached her Knightsbridge hotel.

Maurice was not in the hall, not in his room, not in their sitting room. Still making allowances—after all it had only just struck seven—she went to dress; and had almost finished when he burst in on her, his manner just a little too non-chalant, his dark eyes just a little too bright.

"Awfully sorry to be so late, mother", he began.

"Did you have a good time?"

"Not too bad. Nan's quite a decent dancer."

"Where did she take you?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, we went to two places. The Savoy—and a club she belongs to."

Not for nothing had Charlotte commanded a women's camp.

"A cocktail club?" she suggested.

Maurice fidgeted with the gold pin in his soft blue collar, and applied his mind to subtraction.

"I only had one", he said, teetering in his brown shoes. "I—er—couldn't very well get out of it. You see, that chap she was lunching with turned up. And I should have looked such a fool if I'd refused. Hadn't I—er—better go and get changed?"

"Perhaps that would be as well."

He went to his own room. Alone she tried to tell herself that he had not lied; and further, "Even if he did, it was only because he didn't want to make me angry".

Then she heard the water running; and all her anger turned against Nan.

"She's twenty-three", thought Charlotte. "She ought to have looked after him better. He's so young, so easily led, so different from John or Philip."

But, watching him—sober again—across the dinner table, she only thought how handsome he was and what a marvellous companion for one so young.

"Confess", she said, just before they went to bed that night. "You had more than one cocktail."

Laughing, he held up two fingers; and again she felt that surge of anger against Nan.

"You might have told me the truth", she went on.

"As long as you're under the impression that I only had a couple", thought Maurice.

Kissing her good night, however, he felt rather ashamed of himself; and over next morning's breakfast he said, meaning every word of it:

"I'm going absolutely T.T. for the future because I want to keep really fit. You know we're going to have the match at Lord's again this year. Isn't that ripping? And won't you be proud of me if I knock up a brace of centuries?"

"Why not take all the Eton wickets as well while you're about it?" laughed Charlotte.

§ 4

That part of her conversation with Maurice—but not the overnight incident—Charlotte reported to John, who com-

mented, "He always was a bit of a swankpot. Still, let's hope he puts up a good show, if only for the honour of the family".

And John also laughed, looking at some flowers which a sister more to his taste had just arranged for him.

"Nice ones, aren't they?" he said.

The red roses exhaled such a delicious perfume, and John seemed so delighted at the prospect of a visit from her, that one couldn't go on being angry with Nan.

CHAPTER FORTY

§ 1

BACK at Cambridge, still on his crutches, John Carteret was a little surprised at finding how often and how pleasurably his thoughts turned towards Nan. Not that he ever allowed such thoughts to come between him and his work.

On the contrary. The photograph she had sent him—with a casual letter, "This is the latest atrocity. Burn it if you can't stand the grin. Heaven knows why the man wouldn't let me keep my mouth shut"—seemed a positive stimulus to application.

So did the one visit she paid him, in company with another girl who left them alone for most of the afternoon.

"She's such a cheerful soul", he used to think; and, once, he actually progressed as far as thinking, "If ever I get married, she's just the kind of girl I'd like for a wife".

That last thought, however, gave him one of what he had learned to call his "bad spells".

To begin with—he told himself—he couldn't afford a wife. And to go on with, there was "his leg". Increasingly, he hated himself for being "minus half a leg". The loss of an arm, it seemed to his lack of imagination, would have been infinitely preferable. An empty sleeve conferred, somehow or other, a distinction.

Legless or armless, though, one had to carry on; and anyway it wouldn't be so bad "once they'd fixed him up at Roehampton". He consoled himself with that, and—*The Institutes of Gaius and Justinian* behind him—with Higgins on *The Hague Peace Conferences*.

Further consolation was provided by the assurance of his director of studies—who once described him in the combination room as, "One of those bullet-headed chaps who get there

by just slogging at it"—that he ought, with any luck, to obtain honours in part one of the law tripos examinations.

The prospect of passing his long vacation at the Manor, just evacuated by its hospital staff, was also pleasant—and almost exhilaratingly so when Nan wrote, "What are your plans for the summer? I'm broke to the wide, so I expect I'll be a dutiful stepdaughter and spend most of it with Gladys".

Nevertheless he had another of his bad spells, one of the blackest in his experience, on the last night of term.

§ 2

The station master at Laxford Junction declared, "It's good to see you back with us, Sir John", and escorted the man on the crutches to the car which Charlotte had hired for him.

"Drive ker-ker-carefully, please", said John, and was helped in.

The youth at the wheel did his best; but the pre-war road, the pre-war springs, shook unmercifully; and, by the time they reached the lodge gates, the cripple's face was drawn with the sheer effort of controlling his nerves.

"You look tired", said Charlotte a few minutes later.

"I am rather", admitted John.

His mother helped him out. Simeon, whose dark hair had gone iron gray, came through the double doors. He managed a nice word to Simeon. Ellen followed. Between them, they took his bags.

"Shocked?" asked Charlotte.

"What at?"

"The state the grounds are in."

"I'm afraid I didn't notice."

He swung himself into the hall—and sniffed the one word, "Paint". Charlotte said, "Mostly distemper. It's cheaper. The pictures came back last week. Smart paid for his farm yesterday. Two of the others want to know if they can leave half on mortgage. I said I thought you wouldn't mind. George doesn't".

"It isn't George's money", grumbled John. "Do you mind if I sit down, mother? I really am feeling rather beat."

The Gallery was still rugless, all its furniture sheeted. She led him into the morning room. Seated, he managed to smile at her.

"What have you been doing for servants?" he asked.

"Excepting Kate and an alleged cook", she smiled back at him, "you've already met the entire indoor staff."

"And the outdoor staff?"

"Matthews and that half-witted nephew of his."

"But Matthews must be eighty."

"He's kept up the kitchen garden anyway. And that's something. I've put Lollie on to weed in the moat. She may as well earn her keep."

Simeon brought tea. Laura Marston came in, her face flushed, her hands not too clean.

"Everything's in such a mess", she complained. "It breaks one's heart. And the wages everybody's asking. It's this dole, I believe. Why should people work when they're being paid not to?"

Simeon returned with the afternoon post.

There was a letter from Philip. Charlotte read it aloud, right down to the postscript, "We've just heard about Alcock and Brown flying the Atlantic. Dwight says it marks an epoch. He wants the old man to start an aviation company. If he does, I shall try to get into it".

Laura said, "I don't think you ought to let him. Flying's so dangerous"; and went back to her weeding.

Charlotte passed the next letter over to John, who read it twice before he commented:

"I shall really have to write and tell Maurice the actual position. Hasn't he got any sense in his head? A coach for Lord's indeed".

"You never could make allowances"—his mother spoke a little sharply—"for Maurice's sense of humour. Can't you see he's only trying to be funny?"

And that, of course, was true.

"I suppose I ought to make allowances for the kid", thought John, standing alone—just before dinner—at his bedroom window. "But mother doesn't know as much about him as I do. She's awfully innocent in some ways. Funny. Because she's so clever in others."

His thoughts, though he tried to restrain them, turned to Rupert once more. His mother hadn't been too clever there either. She would have been riding for a good fall if she'd married Cousin Rupert.

Riding! Damn it, he might never be able to ride again.

Depressed, feeling he would have another bad spell if he weren't careful, John made his way downstairs. Dinner, however—with Simeon, entirely undeterred by circumstances, presenting each of the three plain dishes with "Soup, m'lady? Mutton, m'lady? Chocolate pudding, m'lady?"—and a couple of glasses of port to follow, restored something of good humour. And for the next three days he, in his turn, had too much with which to occupy himself for introspection.

Because—however much one might wish to economise—the Manor could not be allowed, as Charlotte phrased it, "to go to rack and ruin for the sake of a few hundred pounds".

§ 3

Increasingly, during those first three days at the Manor, John found himself admiring his mother's cleverness, and her energy, and her complete lack of that selfpity against which he himself had been fighting for so long. Increasingly, but with never a twinge of resentment, he felt her domination.

She was rather like his crutches, he thought in a rare flash of imaginative enlightenment—as necessary for his mind as they were necessary for his body. And curiously, as long as she was with him, he never thought of Nan.

Most of the first day a light rain fell; and they passed their time with notebooks and pencils in the outhouses and the greenhouses. On the second day, they made a thorough inspection of the grounds, the gardens, and the fencing. The third day brought thunderstorms, a conference with the village builder, and the decision to buy "some kind of a car".

"It's just as well we got rid of the old one", declared his mother that evening. "Because I shall want something much lighter and much easier to look after if I'm going to drive myself."

"Certainly not."

He was realising, by then, how much the place meant to her. But she never stressed her love for it; and his own feelings remained lukewarm. Or so he imagined—which amounted to the same thing.

"Just duty", he thought; and on Sunday duty sent them both to church.

The church seemed rather empty. General Frobisher, very tottery in his broadcloth, read the first lesson. The vicar who had married Elizabeth was in a better living. His successor—a man nearing sixty—preached on, "The Spiritual Hope of a League of Nations".

Afterwards Joan Maythorn, Mrs. Marradine and Gladys Pettigrew, accompanied by a nurse and her little daughter, detained them at the lych gate.

Flora Marradine—the "movement" at last victorious—had undertaken a new mission.

"Goats instead of votes", she orated. "You really must join our British Goat Society, Charlotte. Mr. Holmes Pegler—he's our president—is giving us a talk next month. In Laxford Town Hall. I'll send you a ticket. The milk's simply marvellous."

"She says I ought to use it for my complexion", chimed in Joan Maythorn. "But I'm afraid that's past praying for. We've had a terrible job to keep the pack going. But it ought to be all right this winter. Remounts took all your animals, I hear."

"Except that one." Charlotte pointed to Maurice's old pony, Matthews' half-witted nephew at its head.

"You'll have to start looking round fairly soon then."

"If I can afford to hunt."

Joan Maythorn protested. Of course Charlotte could afford to hunt. It wasn't as if she couldn't ride. There were plenty of cheap young 'uns about. Smart had just the thing for her. He'd probably take forty pounds, fifty at the outside.

The pair drifted into horse talk. Flora Marradine went off with the general.

Gladys Pettigrew said to John:

"Nan's coming down in about a fortnight. I'm afraid it'll

be rather dull for her. It's such a pity she won't get married. But then Nan's so fastidious".

Somehow or other, the adjective hurt.

Presently her chauffeur drove Nan's stepmother, the nurse and the red-headed child away. After a little more conversation, Joan Maythorn climbed into her dog cart; and they made for their trap.

"You'll want to hunt", said John, squeezing himself in beside Laura, who had been waiting for them, as his mother took whip and reins. But his thoughts remained with Nan; and that night he dreamed they were dancing together—only to wake with that wretched sensation of having a very tight, very cold puttee wound about his missing calf and the most ghastly cramp in his missing foot.

The cramp and the puttee kept him sleepless for the best part of an hour. Morning, however—and Charlotte's suggestion, "I think I'll drive over and look at that young horse of Smart's"—found him comparatively cheerful.

"I'll come with you", he said.

Margaret Smart fussed over him, insisting he must drink a glass of milk and eat a slice of cake, while his mother went to the stable with her husband. Afterwards, he watched Smart canter the chestnut round the paddock and put him over a low fence.

"He's pretty green—and hardly up to my weight", began Charlotte; and again John admired her as she dickered over the price.

"You're a regular horsecoper", he laughed when they drove away, with the bargain concluded. "But who's going to make him for you?"

"Is there any reason why I shouldn't do that myself?" laughed back Charlotte.

"Not if you don't mind breaking your neck."

She told him, much as another man might have done, that if she chose to break her neck it was none of his business. He realised that the decision to hunt again had exhilarated her; and was glad.

Freed of its worst inhibition, all his boyish love for her was taking root again; and infinitely deeper than he knew.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

§ 1

CHARLOTTE and John arrived home from Smart's Farm shortly after midday, to find Tibbets, still keeper of "The Royal Arms", waiting for them at the stables.

He didn't like asking favours—vouchsafed Tibbets, clutching his straw hat—and of course her ladyship might want someone with more experience, but if a boy had a real liking for the job, and, mind you, though he said it as shouldn't, the boy'd got his three stripes and a Military Medal, so that showed he wouldn't be afraid of a bit of responsibility like, and besides he'd had a good training with the old master, God rest his soul, who'd always taken such a pride in his gardens . . .

"My sister's son", concluded the innkeeper. "Name of Baldock. I could send him up to see your ladyship this afternoon."

§ 2

Ex-sergeant Baldock came, saw and conquered in less than half an hour. The next day Matthews, who had been occupying the gardener's cottage, moved back to the lodge; and Mrs. Baldock, *mirabile dictu*, materialized as a large capable Frenchwoman, some years older than her fresh-faced husband, who declared:

"As we have no children I also would like to earn wages. In Abbeville, I was a cook".

Charlotte doubted; dilly-dallied for forty-eight hours; but eventually allowed "*un tout petit essai, madame*". Whereupon the stout lady from Laxford who had been "obliging, though I'm really not up to the work of a big establishment like this,

Mr. Simeon", was given her notice; and John, sipping real coffee on the terrace while Baldock—Maurice's pony having been denied him—harnessed Matthews' half-witted nephew to the lawnmower, said,

"Mother, we seem to be in luck".

He studied law till tea time. Afterwards, Smart rode the new horse over; and helped Charlotte, skirtless in an old pair of breeches, to put a side saddle on him.

"You see", said Charlotte, after about ten minutes. "As quiet as a sheep—if he's handled properly."

John admonished her, "Don't swank"; and went off to the gunroom—which he had promised to "put in apple-pie order" for her—feeling happier than he had felt for many years.

The guns themselves—thanks to Simeon—had not been neglected. He unlocked the glass-fronted case; snapped them open one by one; squinted down their barrels, and returned them to their racks.

"Quite an armoury", he thought. "Wonder if I'll be able to shoot again. Don't see why not, once I get that leg of mine."

He might fish, too. Not that he'd ever cared much for fishing.

"Got to find something to amuse myself", he brooded; and began to hunt through the various cupboards. Groping in a dark corner, his fingers encountered a piece of forked cherrywood.

Maurice's old catapult. Good lord!

The find provoked memories. He could not help chuckling as he drew it out of the cupboard; and examined the rotted elastic, the leather sling.

"I must show this to mother", he decided; and went on with his job till Simeon rang the first gong.

Charlotte, ignoring his protest that it hardly seemed worthwhile, had insisted they must dress for dinner every evening—Sundays only excepted. He put the catapult in his pocket before he made his clumsy way upstairs; and laid it on his dressing table while he changed.

How quickly—he thought—the years rolled by one. It

seemed only yesterday that he had seen the weasel spring at Maurice's eye, seen Philip squeeze the life out of it. And yet, how everything had changed.

This was a new world. But a worse one. No safety anywhere. All the old security swept away.

"Selfish?" he wondered. "Disgruntled? Well, who wouldn't be?"

As quickly as it had come, however, the mood passed from him; and a mood of shame took its place.

He supported himself to the window; looked out and down. Who was he to be disgruntled, with these lands, this house, still his?

All his trees were in full leaf. Thrushes hopped on his lawns. Round his elms, the rooks circled. His lake shone—a mirror of gold—in the sunshine.

Pity, in a way, that he couldn't make his life here, like his father, and his father's father before him. Why bother about making money, about a career?

"Mother would like it", he thought; and, suddenly, from the nearby window, he heard her voice.

She was singing to herself. Mother! Years since he had heard her do that. Not since he'd been a kid at Hendersons. She must be happy then. She must have given up missing Rupert.

Good. Oh, good!

An irresistible impulse moving him, he picked up the catapult; took his crutches, and swung himself across the landing to her door. She was still singing. He let her finish the song before he knocked.

"Come in", she called.

He had trouble with the handle, but his words gave him no trouble at all.

"I discovered this while I was tidying up the gunroom", he said. "I thought it might amuse you to see it."

She took the cherrywood from him, and balanced it between thumb and forefinger. Such lovely hands, she had—and such a lovely voice.

"What a queer find, John. What are we going to do with it? Keep it till Maurice comes home for his holidays? He's

getting a little old for catapults. Still, in case you ever present me with a grandson . . .”

And, smiling, she put the thing away in a drawer.

It was the first time she had suggested such a possibility. He felt glad that she had her back to him; that she could not perceive his discomposure.

“Elizabeth doesn’t seem to be able to manage a boy”, she went on. “Not that it matters. He wouldn’t inherit.”

“Mother”—the words stuck between his teeth, but somehow he managed them without stammering—“you don’t quite know what you’re saying. A chap like I am can’t get married.”

She closed the drawer; turned, and stared at him.

“May one ask why?”

He tried to tell her why, “Because I’m such a cripple. Because it wouldn’t be decent. Because if a girl were at all fastidious——” But before he could continue she interrupted him with the one syllable :

“Rot.

“Absolute rot.” He saw, without understanding, how angry he had made her. “The sooner you stop thinking like that about yourself the better.”

“But I can’t help it.”

“You’ve got to help it.

Her blue eyes dominated him. He still read anger in them.

“Do you really imagine”, she went on, “that your wound would make any difference to a girl, that it would influence her in the slightest degree, if she fell in love with you?”

All the old stubborn in him answered, “I’m not going to debate that point with you, because I simply can’t accept your original premise”.

“Very well, dear. Have it your own way.” Abruptly, still without understanding, he knew that her eyes, her whole mood had softened. “And I promise not to say, ‘I told you so’ when it happens.”

“When what happens?”

But Charlotte only laughed “For a lawyer we’re being a little slow in our uptake this evening. The witness, having made her statement, refuses to answer any more questions.

Besides, she wants to get her breeches off. So run along, there's a good boy".

Once again John heard her singing to herself as he negotiated the stairs.

§ 3

Laura went to bed early that night. The stars were hardly out when she left mother and son alone on the terrace: John with one of his father's last cigars between his teeth; Charlotte with a piece of embroidery—though it was too dark for stitching—on the lap of her last pre-war evening gown.

They spoke little, and only of trivial things—this sudden heat wave, Baldock's demand for skilled woodmen, the car they would buy ("Now that I've got the money for my jewellery"), the need to reserve rooms in London ("Next week, isn't it?") "Yes, dear. I'd better write tomorrow") for the Eton and Harrow match.

They were too happy, that night, for overmuch speech—John because her words before dinner were already ridding him, though as yet he could hardly realise this, of another fixation—Charlotte, among many other reasons, because, in giving her the catapult, he seemed to have implied that there would be no more misunderstandings between him and Maurice.

"Just misunderstandings", she thought as she blew out her candle and composed herself for sleep. "Just a difference in their temperaments. They'll be the best of friends as they grow older; as they learn to appreciate each other's good qualities."

All next morning, too, mother and son were very happy, pottering down to the village in the pony cart; pottering back to spend half an hour in consultation with Baldock, and another half-hour over the Stores' catalogue.

They lunched leisurely that day, and drank their coffee in the Gallery, now much as of old except that its brocades were a little more faded. Afterwards, John took Digby's *History of the Law of Real Property* to the deck chair under the big cedar; and Charlotte put on her gardening gloves.

"You're no good at it", she told Laura. "But there's something you can do for me. Go down to the lodge and ask

that wretched builder man how much longer he's going to be before he's finished repairing that roof."

§ 4

It was to Laura Marston, accordingly, that Mrs. Brabazon's telegraph boy—the Manor telephone happened not to be functioning—handed his envelope.

Laura opened and read that message automatically. The boy asked, "Is there any answer, miss?"

She stared at him through her pince-nez. He repeated his question.

"You'd better come up to the house with me", said Laura—and her false teeth chattered as she spoke.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

§ 1

ONCE round the lake, the shortest way to the house was by the grass path which led straight up to the terrace. But that way—Laura knew—would take her too close to the big cedar in whose shade John lay reading.

She kept, therefore, to the drive ; and, telling the boy to wait there, went in by the servants' door and out again across the bridge.

Blinking about her, she saw Charlotte's big hat above the privet hedge of the little rose garden ; and went there on slow feet.

"This has just come", she said. "I thought you should see it first. The boy's waiting for an answer."

Laura held out the telegram. Charlotte—first laying scissors and basket on the sundial—took it from her.

"You were quite right", said Charlotte slowly. "But of course we can't keep it from John."

She re-read the pencilled words, "In most awful trouble do come Harrow as soon as you can head has written to you but don't wait for that Maurice" ; and felt suddenly cold.

"Will you go at once ?" asked Laura. "Shall I pack for you ?"

Still speaking very slowly, Charlotte said, "I don't know. I must ask John".

She turned, and went towards the bridge. Laura waited a moment. Then she put the scissors in the basket, picked it up and followed, thinking, "Maurice can't have done anything really dreadful. They can't want to get rid of him".

But already Gertrude Henderson's daughter was without hope.

She was afraid, too—as she walked slowly through the hall

and out into the sunshine again—of John's rage, of the effect this message might have on his mind.

"Just as I was getting him better", she thought; and, for one terrible moment, she experienced a great bitterness against Maurice.

John, absorbed in study, had not seen her cross the terrace; did not hear her feet on the grass.

"Not tea time?" he asked, looking up as she came out of the sun into the shadow.

"Not nearly. I'm sorry to disturb you. But I had to."

His brown eyes probed her face; went to the flimsy paper, clutched in her right hand.

"There's—a spot of trouble", she went on, trying to make her voice light, struggling for the assumed nonchalance of the war years.

"Maurice?"

"Yes."

"Show me."

Wondering why his mind should have jumped to the conclusion—after all, the telegram might have been about Elizabeth, only just over her third confinement—she obeyed. He took in the words at a glance. She saw his face set, his free hand clench.

"I suppose you realise what this means", he said after a while.

"Presumably"—she was still struggling for nonchalance—"that we shan't be going to Lord's."

Again, his eyes probed her face.

"It means the sack", he went on; and, after another while, "I can't say I'm altogether surprised."

He appeared calm. Somehow this irritated her. Her impulse, now, was to defend Maurice.

"You aren't being very helpful", she said. "What am I to do? It's got to be answered. The boy's waiting."

"We can't possibly go till we've had the Head's letter."

"We?"

John hesitated.

"You don't appear to understand", he began. "I *must* come with you. Bridges may have something to say that you . . . oughtn't to hear about."

He stopped dead—and her heart's beating seemed to stop with his voice. The blood seemed to be ebbing from her brain, from her lips, from her very fingers. She heard her own voice saying, incoherently, all the assumption of nonchalance gone :

"Don't treat me as though I were an idiot. That's impossible. He may have got drunk. He may have broken bounds. Anything".

He did not answer. She saw that he had his pencil in his hand ; that he was filling in the reply form.

"I think this about covers it", he said at last ; and, as though he were reading out an army message :

"Carteret Headmasters Harrow-on-the-Hill. Prefer await letter will start immediately on receipt stop probably with you tomorrow about three John".

"Well ?" he asked.

That time, her eyes probed.

"If you don't mind", she said ; and, taking the pencil, scratched out the last word, to show him, "Love Mother", written in its place.

§ 2

It was a full quarter of an hour since Charlotte, saying, "We'd better not keep that telegraph boy waiting any longer", had left John alone under his cedar. High time she came back.

"Yet perhaps", he brooded, "it's just as well as she hasn't."

Because he needed a little longer to control himself, to re-master his rage.

Not so bad, really, the way he had controlled his original temper ; his impulse to blurt out, "The young swine. Disgracing us like this. Wait till I get to Harrow. I'll give him hell all right".

He could keep himself in hand if he tried hard enough. And he must go on trying, if only for his mother's sake. This business was worse for her than for him.

"A sight worse", he decided, remembering the alteration she had made in his telegram. "Because it's no good pretending that I ever loved the little devil—though of course I shouldn't like him to come to any harm."

Looking at the black and white wristwatch he had bought himself for soldiering, he saw that it was close to tea time; picked up his crutches, and made for the house.

A post came while they were having tea, but no letter from the school. Except for mentioning this fact as she riffled through the envelopes, Charlotte did not refer to Maurice. Neither did Laura.

The three of them kept up the tapu until after dinner. Then Laura said, "The telephone's working again. Shall I ring up the garage at Laxford and order a car to catch the nine-fifty?"

John said, "That might be as well"; and, for the next hour, pretended to be studying while Charlotte pretended to read a novel.

"You mustn't let this get on your nerves, mother", he told her as soon as Laura left them to themselves; and Charlotte smiled at him before she answered, "As long as you don't"; kissed him, a trifle more warmly than her habit, when they parted on the landing for the night.

"Sleep well", she called, knowing herself utterly sleepless; and stood at her own window until she saw the light blotted from his.

§ 3

Just before dawn, Charlotte slept. But the first chirp of the birds woke her—to a fear never experienced, to a foreboding of disaster that dimmed the very radiance of day.

The war had left her with no ignorances. Even without John's hint, her imagination would have taken—had already taken, while she was still reading Maurice's telegram—this ghastly path.

Frantically she beat imagination away from the ghastly path. Frantically she conjured up the image of Maurice, of his dark eyes, of his flaxen hair.

"Tell me!" she caught herself praying to some unknown god. "Tell me. *That* isn't true. *That* can't be true. Not of my son."

Kate, bringing tea, found her already dressed.

"Has the post come?" she asked.

"Not yet, m'lady. It's only just seven. You told me to call you early."

"Of course."

Kate took the other tray to John's room. Leaving her own untouched, Charlotte hurried downstairs, out into the sunshine, down along the drive.

Open air calmed her a little. A fish was jumping in the lake. She had a quick vision of Maurice, his first rod over his shoulder, lifting up his jam jar full of minnows, to say, "Look what I've caught, mumsey"; of herself, stooping to pat that bright little head.

That couldn't be true. *That* wasn't true. Maurice had always been—what had her mother called him?—a young scamp. But he'd never been . . . vicious.

Not *her* son.

She reached the lodge gates, which Matthews had not yet opened. She tugged at the lower bolt, at the upper; swung the heavy iron.

Rabbits were nibbling the turf at roadside. The creak of the gate frightened them. She saw the white scuts plunge for their holes; heard the postman's cycle bell beyond the curve of the hedge.

The postman rode into view. She held up a hand. He dismounted; touched his cap; hitched his bag forward; took out the packet of envelopes. She heard herself say, "Thank you, Robbins. This is the one I want. Take the others up to the house, please".

The red cycle, its tyres crunching on gravel, wobbled through the gates. She knew that her hands were as frozen as they had once been round the handle of a boat's oar. But her fingers were quite steady. They did what she told them. So did her eyes . . .

Only . . . only . . . why should there be this moisture in her eyes? Why was her mouth out of control? Why couldn't she stop laughing? She had no right to be laughing? She ought to be—how had the man put it?—"distressed and horrified to learn of the boy's behaviour".

But she wasn't. She wasn't. Let them sack him for his disgraceful behaviour. She, his mother, didn't give a damn.

Still between tears and laughter—no need to read those three closely written pages again—she restored the letter to its envelope ; and stood still for a while, amazed at her own emotions, conscious only of relief.

Then, slowly, that first hysterical frenzy of relief turned to anger, to a keen sorrow, to the ultimate question, “Am I to blame?”

“May be I am”, she thought. “I’ve always spoilt him. I’ve never punished him. I’ve always let him have his own way.”

All the same—relief by now forgotten—anger predominated over sorrow ; and, walking the drive again, she experienced a faint disgust.

There was nothing noble, nothing to admire, about this new escapade. That Maurice had “betrayed his trust as captain of the games” could just be condoned. He’d always been—another of her mother’s phrases—*harum scarum*. Under a better system, he would never have been given responsibility.

But his “confessed association with a woman of a certain class in a riverside night club” ; added to the fact, also confessed, that he had persuaded “two of his juniors—one of them, I am sorry to tell you, also in the eleven” to accompany him on “one of what he informs me have been various similar expeditions during which they have indulged in drink”, gave her a sensation of actual nausea, which she could hardly repress.

Maurice. Messing about with that class of woman. And how sly he had been, how he had cheated her with his, “I’m going absolutely T.T. for the future because I want to keep really fit”.

“He must be punished”, she decided. And yet, wouldn’t the one punishment (“We’re going to have the match at Lord’s again. Isn’t that ripping?”) be enough.

Mother love ousted resentment. Her heart softened. She began to tell herself—as she approached the house—that one had to make allowances for youth, for the whole ill-discipline of the period.

At all costs, moreover, one must stand up for Maurice to John.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

§ 1

The tactful Laura had not yet appeared for breakfast when Charlotte gave the Head's letter to John. His first reaction, also, was relief.

"Might be worse", he commented; then grimly, "But not much."

Almost at once, Laura came down. The three of them ate almost in silence. At five minutes past nine the hired car drove on to the terrace.

"Will you be home in time for dinner?" asked Laura.

John answered, "Yes. I think we shall be able to manage it"; and, doing so, realised that the domination—momentarily at any rate—was his.

"My show", he thought. "Mother can't handle this thing. It isn't a woman's job."

Somehow or other, the thought proved pleasurable. Talking hardly at all—there was no partition between them and their driver—he hugged it to himself. He'd show Maurice, once and for all, that he was the head of the family, and that he wouldn't have the name disgraced.

§ 2

Throughout their train journey to London Charlotte found John strangely like his father.

"There's no point in your seeing Bridges", he said more than once. "He won't go back on his decision. How can he? He's got to keep discipline."

Until finally Charlotte had to insist, "He wrote to me. Not to you. Come with me if you like. But you're not going to see him alone".

Eventually, he agreed to let her have her own way up to that point; but stuck to his decision that they should lunch in London, taking her to the new ladies' room at his club.

"We'll have a car", he pronounced. "It'll be easier. We don't want to miss our train home."

The porter secured them a car big enough for Maurice's luggage. Forty minutes along the Harrow Road brought them to the foot of the hill.

"You're sure you won't let me leave you at the King's Head?" he asked as they climbed for the school.

Their wills clashed; he felt his own weaken.

"Positive", said his mother. "And—you're not to be unkind to him."

"You don't expect me to kiss him, I hope."

"John"—just for a moment her hand rested on his knee—"he's my son."

Sentiment had him then—but only for a moment. Maurice had always been "a pest". He would go on being a pest. Still—he was one's brother. And one had to be fair.

Their car breasted the hill, slowed along the narrow street, drew up at the remembered door. It was a half-holiday—no boys about. A new butler ushered them into the known room with the slope of sunlit garden beyond its windows.

"I will tell the headmaster you are here", he said.

The Head came in almost at once. His blue blazer, his cricketing flannels, seemed to strike an incongruous note as he shook hands, gravely, with Charlotte, as he said:

"My dear John, I do hope you're better. You mustn't stand about on those crutches".

He arranged chairs for them. They sat down. He stood by his desk. The domination was his now—and completely.

"You received my letter, Lady Carteret", he began. "I'm afraid there's very little I can add to it. As I told you last autumn, Maurice has been very far from a good influence. I should not be doing my duty by the others if I were to let him stay until the end of term."

He paused there; and looked at John, who said, "I quite understand, sir".

Looking to Charlotte, he continued, "You understand that, too, I hope".

Charlotte nodded.

"And the other two?" she asked.

"One left last night. One is very young. He . . . did not prevaricate."

John saw his mother wince. His heart went out to her; but against Maurice it hardened. Damn the fellow, whatever he'd done, he needn't have lied about it.

The grave voice went on. Now it tried to mitigate the blow. Maybe—it said—these troublous times were a little to blame. There seemed to be a spirit of unrest abroad—a general rebellion against the old moralities. Maurice had always wanted to go to the war. School discipline had . . . chafed him. Discipline, however, must be maintained. One had to make . . . examples. Maurice was still very young. Ultimately this lesson would be for his benefit.

"He's fairer than I am", thought John. "But he doesn't really believe that. He only hopes it."

And yet—barring the lies Maurice seemed to have told—had he behaved so unforgivably? One must be human about this thing. One had one's own standard, of course. But it wasn't everybody's. Chaps did get tight. Chaps did run about after girls . . .

The mollifying thought ebbed away—yet left a queer residuum as it sank below the surface of John's mind. Secretly analysing this residuum, he knew it for a blend of jealousy and admiration, unaccountably familiar. Thus he had been wont to think of . . .

But before he could draw the parallel, his mother was saying, "We came down by motor car. We can take him away now if you want us to".

"That would be the best course, Lady Carteret. He is in his room. I will have him sent for."

"I'd rather go up—if you will permit me to."

John stooped for his crutches. Again her hand rested on his knee.

"Please", she said; and was through the door before either of them realised her intention.

The Reverend Nathaniel smiled that curious loose-lipped smile which endeared him to so many, as his old pupil stammered :

"I hope you don't mer-mer-mind mer-mer-mother being so impulsive, sir".

"If my memory is not at fault, my dear boy", he said, "I once read you a little lecture, warning you 'not to be too harsh in your judgments.'"

That time it was John who winced.

§ 3

As she made her way out of the study and up the uncarpeted staircase to the scratched door of the room Maurice had occupied for the last two terms, Charlotte's one thought was, "I mustn't be weak".

Yet the very first sound of his voice, the very first sight of him, standing by his corded box, weakened her. He looked so unutterably miserable ; so absurdly young.

For long seconds, neither spoke. Then, automatically, her arms opened ; and he came to them, and kissed her, and snuggled his head on her shoulder, whispering the old word, "Mumsey".

"Trying to get round me", she thought, but could not keep her fingers from fondling his hair.

He broke away from her then, and her mind resumed its purpose.

"You've made a nice mess of things", she began.

"Don't I know it. You've seen the Head, I suppose ?"

"Yes." She chose her arrow. "I've left John with him."

The point went home. His face altered—the mouth trembling, apprehension in the dark eyes.

"Why did you have to bring John ?"

"He insisted on coming with me."

"Oh."

She waited for him to speak again. Her eyes went round the room. Hooks and nails were all bare. No pictures. No fez. No muffler. No dark blue cap. Only those two cricket bats leaning against the trunk bespoke past triumphs.

He noticed her survey.

"I thought I'd better get everything packed up", he said. "It's pretty rotten, isn't it?"

"But entirely your own fault."

His upper lip stiffened; his eyes sulked; but even so his sense of humour did not quite fail.

"Must I take another pi-jaw", he said. "The Head's was bad enough. To hear him talk you'd think I'd put myself absolutely beyond the pale. And after all——"

He hesitated. Resentful again, she forbore from prompting him.

"After all", he repeated, "I haven't done anything so very dreadful. If I'd been in the army—lots of chaps younger than I am got in all right—and stayed in—nobody would have made all this fuss just because I got in a car and went on a binge."

His change of front added to her resentment.

"If you expect me to be proud of you", she said, "you're making a big mistake."

Feet along the passage disturbed them. A footman came in, saying, "I beg your pardon, m'lady. But can I take Mr. Carteret's things to your car?"

Charlotte nodded. Maurice said, "I'll take the bats myself" The man picked up the box and went out with it.

"Is that all there is?" asked Charlotte.

"Yes. I've given away the pictures and things."

"You'll have to say goodbye to the Head, won't you?"

"What—again? Not if I jolly well know it."

"Maurice"—sharply, resentment turned to anger—"the fact that you've forgotten your morals doesn't entitle you to forget your manners."

Once more the point went home. Once again he changed front.

"All right", he grinned. "Floreat Herga. I'll do my best to behave like a little gentleman."

The butler, however, stood waiting for them with a message when they reached the foot of the stairs.

The headmaster was extremely sorry. He had been obliged to go out. Sir John was already in the car.

§ 4

As they followed into the open air, Maurice whispered, "Let me have a Bradbury, will you, mother? Old Soames was pretty decent about getting that telegram off. And could I have ten bob for Robert?"

She opened her bag and gave him the money. After tipping them, he shook hands with both servants. The chauffeur had removed one of the seats in the limousine to make room for his box.

"I'd better sit outside", he said to her; and to John, through the open window, "Hallo. How are you? Better?"

John growled, "I'm all right, thanks".

As the car started, Maurice gave some order to the chauffeur; and a minute later John was asking, "What's the fellow reversing for? He only has to go straight on and turn to his left at the bottom of the hill".

"Wouldn't we go past the cricket field if he did?" suggested Charlotte.

They looked at each other.

Then John said, "Naturally Maurice wouldn't like that".

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

§ 1

NEARLY all the way back to London, John—sucking at his unlit pipe—kept silence; and Charlotte's eyes fixed themselves on her youngest son's back. She saw that Maurice and the chauffeur were talking to each other; and thought, irritably, "If only he seemed repentant". Yet sentiment continued to affect her, and that one childish word, "Mumsey", to echo in her mind.

"It's no use bullying him", she decided; and found that she had said as much to John, who ruminated, and took the pipe stem from between his square teeth, before he answered:

"You may be right. But is that the main question? They'll hardly let him come up to Cambridge after this. And he must do something with himself. We could send him abroad of course. But I doubt if that's advisable. The chances are he'll only get into some worse mischief".

"He wants to be a painter."

"That's about all he's fit for."

Once more John's teeth closed on the pipe stem. For the first time in her life Charlotte found herself a little angry at his puritanism—and a little frightened for the future.

"Maurice doesn't come into his own money for the best part of four years", he reminded her as they turned off the Harrow Road and crossed the bridge over the canal. "Until then, he'll have to do what you or I tell him."

"Even you, John, can't make a horse drink."

His mother's words seemed to echo his old headmaster's criticism. "If only I could like him", thought John, "if only I weren't so completely certain he's going to turn out a ne'er-do-well. Why isn't he more like Philip? Philip's a jolly good chap."

He looked at his watch ; tapped on the partition with one of his crutches ; and called, "Tell him to go straight to the station, we'd better have our tea there", as Maurice slid back the glass.

Maurice called back, "Right-ho". He closed the glass again. They made the terminus, and found a table in a tea room crowded enough to impose neutrality.

Their compartment on the train, also—much to Maurice's relief—held a couple of strangers. He managed to "borrow" some more money from his mother—and "invested" two shillings in a detective story which insured his mind against other preoccupations till they reached Laxford.

"I can manage mother on my head", he thought as he secured the outside seat again. "But if John starts ticking me off, it'll be the very devil of a job to keep him from getting my rag out."

Approaching the Manor, nevertheless, youth experienced its reaction.

What a fool he'd made of himself. And all for the sake of a ruddy girl who'd confessed, *afterwards*, "So you thought I was in love with you. Aren't you a scream? Why, you're only just out of the nursery".

When he might have played at Lord's !

§ 2

Throughout dinner—served within ten minutes of their arrival at the Manor—Maurice's reaction oppressed him more and more.

How much rather—he felt—would he have been at Harrow. How he hated this make-believe conversation with his mother and John and Lollie. Why couldn't they all just blurt out what they were thinking, and get it over ?

Simeon wouldn't mind !

Simeon offered him a cigarette. He knew that his fingers were shaking as he lit up—and hoped it would escape John's notice. Simeon went out, leaving them to their coffee. John was drinking port. He hadn't even been offered any.

Laura said, "If you'll excuse me, I've forgotten to write

that letter about the new fencing". His mother said, "There's no hurry about that. You can do it tomorrow".

Maurice thought, "That was an order. She doesn't want Lollie to leave us alone. I shouldn't wonder if they didn't hang the whole thing up till tomorrow morning".

They! His mother and John. Allied against him. Somehow or other, he would have to break up that alliance. If only because it made him feel so infernally jealous.

Meanwhile—another order?—John was saying, "If you've finished your coffee, mother, I'd rather like to have a few words alone with Maurice".

It had cost John an effort to say that. And his mother—he realised—did not approve. Once again he felt their wills clashing; but after a moment's hesitancy she rose from her chair and went out, taking Laura with her, through the door which Maurice held open.

"You must be fair", John ordered himself, as his brother closed the door and came back to the table. "After all, it might have been worse."

He opened on that note, and Maurice grinned, a little nervously.

"Help yourself to a glass of port", continued John, now fighting his own nerves. "I don't want to give you a pi-jaw or anything. That won't get us anywhere. But I think you should tell me exactly what happened."

"Why? Didn't Bridges?"

The tone, hostile to the point of rudeness, betrayed so much of Maurice's feelings that John's first instinct was to say, "Don't you try to ride the high horse with me, blast you". But the memory of Charlotte's, "It's no use bullying", made him tactful beyond his years. He even managed to smile, "You seem to forget I had mother with me"; and Maurice, suddenly hating himself for the rudeness (after all, it had been pretty decent of John to offer him a glass of port!) smiled back, "I suppose that did cramp the old boy's style a bit. He let me have it straight from the shoulder all right. Talked about tawdry harlots and all that sort of thing".

"And was she?"

Maurice hesitated, his face flaming.

"She was a damned little rotter", he said at last; "I wish I'd never set eyes on her." And he added, meaning it, "I'm going to keep off girls for the future".

"Just as well", said John, trying to believe him; and, suddenly mindful of their last talk on the same subject, during which Maurice had taken his own experiences with the sex for granted, grew a trifle selfconscious.

"Just as well", he repeated. "And if I were you, I'd go pretty slow on the drink. It doesn't do one's health any good."

"No. I suppose not."

Silence held them both. The last of the daylight was just fading beyond the dining room windows. Maurice, in his turn selfconscious, hazarded, "I see we've got all the pictures back".

"Yes", grunted John, thinking, "What a coward I am"; and went on, "What I really wanted to talk to you about is the future. You'll have to do something, you know."

Maurice's eyes were still with his favourite picture, the Velasquez. "John isn't like that one", he told himself. "Except about the forehead."

Aloud he said, with an assumption of nonchalance, "I shall be able to go up to Clare, shan't I?"

"I doubt it."

"Oh well, if I can't, I can't."

Again silence held them. Again Maurice broke it.

"It seems bally unfair, though", he went on. "After all, it isn't as though I'd stolen. Or done the other thing." And suddenly, altogether unwillingly, John began to feel sorry for him; to experience, for the first time, his fascination.

"We'll have to see what can be done about it", he said.

And his eyes went to his favourite picture—Contrary Carteret in the Roundhead armour, while Maurice thought, inconsequently:

"He's being jolly decent. Not that I really want to go to Cambridge. It's a cursed nuisance Nan having been at that club. Thank goodness I didn't have my leg blown off. I bet it gives him gyp sometimes. Paris would be the place. Or Vienna. Nan's seen me tight two or three times. If she

lets on about my bashing that boatman over the head mother'll be simply livid".

But of course Nan wouldn't. She was too much of a sport.

§ 3

Simeon, anxious to clear his table and go to bed, gave John an opportunity to break off the inconclusive conference. Maurice handed him his crutches. Taking them, he felt that he had been far too weak; but his last words, "I think you'd better turn in now, I'll say good night to mother for you", and Maurice's acknowledgment of the order, "Right-ho. If you think that's what I'd better do", restored selfconfidence.

Pleasing, also, were the recollections that he had kept his temper—and hardly stammered at all.

He swung himself through the hall, where the oil lamps had only just been lit, on to the terrace. His mother was walking there.

"Well?" she asked. "How did it go off?"

"Not too badly. I . . . can't help feeling a bit sorry for him."

"Saul among the prophets", smiled Charlotte—her own anger against Maurice diminished by the sheer beauty of the night.

"I'm glad", she went on. "You were such a long time that it rather . . . harassed me. You see, I've always hated the idea of you two being . . . bad friends. And then——"

She paused. Aware of the unusual emotion—conscious that they were closer to each other than ever in their lives—he prompted her:

"Yes, mother?"

"I've been so worried about you", she admitted. "Ever since I read his telegram. It didn't seem right, just when you were getting better——"

Again she paused, before continuing, "I've been wondering, ever since I left you alone with him, what your father would have done".

"I know one thing he wouldn't have done. He wouldn't have let himself lose his temper."

"But he might have pretended to."

"Ought I to have?"

"My dear, do you think I don't understand how difficult it must have been for you not to let yourself go?"

Their moment—almost a lovers' moment—was still on them. No more speech seemed necessary. This trouble—each knew—had its supreme consolation in the attunement of their own minds.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

§ 1

THAT consolation, the knowledge of a new attunement between her own mind and John's, was still very present to Charlotte when she woke next day. Maurice's dismissal from Harrow might be "a blow", his future "quite a problem". But never again would she have to stand up to blows or solve problems alone.

The years of complete widowhood were over. This John had taken the place of the other. Amazing thought!

Yet the thought—for all the amazement—would not be denied. It haunted her all the time she was dressing; seemed to become certainty when—first in the hall as usual—she stood staring up at the "other John's" picture, brought here from Montpelier Square.

Was this—she caught herself wondering—the supreme boon of motherhood: to find, in the flesh of one's own flesh, understanding, comfort, a strong arm to lean on when one's own grew weak?

That thought, however, proved too amazing. Almost immediately, cynicism intervened. To begin with, she had no intention of growing weak. To go on with, once John married—and of course he would marry—she would be all alone again.

"And this picture", cynicism finally decided, "always was a daub."

She said as much to Laura, who found her still inspecting the gold-framed canvas; and was surprised at the look on that unusually subservient face.

"I don't agree with you at all", said Laura. "And I don't think we ought to have hung it here. It should have been in the dining room. With the others."

The poor dear. All sentimentalism and no taste.

"You'd hang 'I want to see the wheels go round, mummy' next to a Goya", snapped Charlotte; and went in to breakfast without another word.

She felt annoyed with herself—realising her own sentimentalism the root cause of the momentary unkindness. All the same, worms—even the dearest ones—had no right to turn.

"Where's Mr. Maurice?" she asked Simeon the moment he brought in the dishes. "Why isn't he down yet?"

"I'm sure I don't know, m'lady", answered another of her worms; and again she felt annoyed with herself.

Maurice, however—John, as a cripple, could still exercise the privilege of breakfasting in his bedroom and did so most mornings—appeared almost at once.

She permitted him to kiss her; and opened her letters. He helped himself to eggs and bacon from the sideboard. Noticing the smallness of the portion, the subdued look in his eyes, other signs of perturbation, she decided to tackle him as soon as she had interviewed Mrs. Baldock.

His mood, that morning, seemed one of complete repentance. He'd made a "perfect ass of himself". He was "most terribly sorry". All he asked was that *she* should forgive him.

Charlotte found it a little difficult to make her, "That will depend on how you behave yourself for the future", sound sufficiently severe.

§ 2

The repentance of Maurice and his faith in his own reformation were genuine enough. Every day that followed made it less and less easy for Charlotte to be severe. And by the end of his first week at the Manor even John's resentment yielded to the charm.

Maurice never actually spoke of himself as "turning over a new leaf". That would have spoiled the imaginary picture. His young selfconviction insisted on deeds rather than words.

"I've had my lesson", he used to tell himself. "No more girls. No more booze. *Mens sana in corpore sano* as old Stick-in-the-Mud used to say."

This—and the reaction from what he once permitted his thoughts to describe as a “nasty jolt to a chap’s vanity”—induced a hair shirt complex. He decided to bathe in the lake before breakfast, and to walk at least eight miles—if he couldn’t get any tennis or cricket—between two-thirty and four-thirty every afternoon.

During these walks, he meditated on the future. A fellow who’d really turned over a new leaf mustn’t be selfish. He mustn’t let himself be a burden on his family. Therefore, no Varsity—no Paris—no Vienna. What then? Business—like Philip? But could a man give up the one thing he had a real talent for—Art?

“I can’t help feeling”, he told John, diffidently, over his one glass of port (only alcohol the hair shirt sanctioned) on the eighth night of his reformation, “that it would be a mistake if you tried to get me into Cambridge. People do remember things. Besides, there’s the money. And it’ll be jolly lonely for mother when you go back there. She ought to have somebody. I needn’t waste my time if I stay with her. One can draw and paint anywhere, thank goodness. That’s what I really want to do, you know.”

And when John asked, “Don’t you have to go to a school if you want to learn to paint properly?” he was answered, “Of course that’s what I’d like to do eventually. But there’s no hurry”.

“Well, I’ll talk it over with mother”, John promised; and late that evening they decided to let Maurice have his way.

It would be so much easier, thought John—and so much safer, thought Charlotte—to keep the culprit at the Manor. At any rate for the next year.

§ 3

This decision entailed others. Maurice—now seeing himself a second Orpen—demanded “a studio”; and prowled the outhouses until he discovered a lean-to with the requisite north light.

“It wouldn’t cost much to fix this place up”, he coaxed. And his next demands were for a dog and, “Something to ride,

if we can afford it. After all, you're going to hunt this winter, mother".

Charlotte, thinking, "The more he has to keep him out of mischief the better", sanctioned the builder's estimate, the purchase of a six-months old Labrador bitch from Mrs. Heythrop ("If we buy a bitch we can breed from her and make money out of the puppies"), and promised to consider the question of a mount.

Meanwhile Joan Maythorn gave a lawn-tennis party; the tactful vicar called to ask if Maurice would "help me to coach the village boys"—and August bank holidays brought Nan to the Grange.

Maurice—among whose other demands had been a bicycle—"happened" to ride in the direction of the Grange the very day after Nan's arrival, and "didn't see why he shouldn't look her up".

Under cross-examination—Gladys having left them alone for a few moments—he admitted, "I heard you were about due", and pleaded for discretion.

"You not-not, me not-not", laughed Nan; and just before he cycled off again, "Don't forget to give my love to John".

Her insistence struck Maurice as a trifle peculiar. So did his brother's reception of the message. John's, "So she's turned up, has she?" sounded just a shade too offhand.

"I suppose we'll have to invite the pair of them to dinner", he went on to Charlotte; and Maurice made a mental note of his mother's face as she said, "Oh, one of these days".

"Doesn't like the girl", he decided—and fancied that he knew why.

Nan was altogether too modern for his mother; she would hate it like the devil if John fell in love with her. Not that there could be any real fear—or was it any real hope?—of that.

The confusion implied by this last thought puzzled him considerably. As a reformed character, he only wanted John *and* his mother to be happy. All the same he wouldn't mind their being . . . just a little less close.

"Too dashed close", Maurice brooded. "Always about together. Treating me as though I were *their* kid."

The inchoate jealousy—though he felt slightly ashamed of

it—proved difficult to suppress. It might be a jolly good thing if John did fall in love and get married. He would have mother to himself them.

§ 4

John Carteret, however, was still heartwhole. This new companionship between himself and Charlotte—he had never been a man of easy friendships—seemed to fulfil every need for mental intimacy. The last operation had been entirely successful. He was sleeping like a top. His nerves rarely bothered him. He only stammered occasionally. And, by October, he would have his artificial leg.

Nan's proximity, nevertheless, did not leave him quite unmoved. It would be nice to see Nan again. Bless the girl, she was always in such high spirits. Played a jolly good game of auction, too.

"Gladys usen't to be too bad either", he told Charlotte. "We might ask them over for a rubber one afternoon if you're not keen on having them to dinner. What about Saturday?"

And on the Saturday, about three o'clock, they arrived—Gladys at her heartiest, Nan unusually subdued.

"The country", declared Nan, on being told that she didn't look quite as fit as the last time he'd seen her, "always gets me down." On which her stepmother—having refrained by an almost superhuman effort from blurting out, "She probably hasn't got as much make-up on as the last time you saw her"—said, "Of course it is rather dull for her. She has such a gay time when she's in London".

"Too gay", thought Charlotte; but kept her thoughts to herself.

They played—Gladys insisting—"families". At tea time Maurice and Laura joined them under the cedar.

"Don't you play, Miss Marston?" asked Nan.

"Oh, yes, I'm very fond of it."

"Then won't you take my hand afterwards?"

Maurice chimed in, "Oh, do, Lollie. Then I can show her my studio".

They went off together. As he watched them disappear round the angle of the house, John also experienced his

inchoate jealousy. Nan had come over to play auction with him, not to look at that "silly young ass' daubs".

§ 5

Nan and Maurice were away for the best part of an hour.

"He tried to do a sketch of me", said Nan. "But there wasn't time. So he's going to have another shot at it to-morrow afternoon. You don't mind if I come over again so soon, I hope, Lady Carteret?"

The deference conquered.

"Of course not, my dear", smiled Charlotte. "Come whenever you like."

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

§ 1

JOHN said, "You ought to have a game licence if you're going after partridges". Maurice grinned, "There's only one covey on our land, and it'll be a miracle if I get within a mile of them".

"Lawless young devil", commented John.

Maurice went off for his gun and cartridges. Charlotte looked up from her *Times*.

"There's a lot about this new London to Paris air service", she said. "I must cut it out and send it to Philip."

"And Ireland?" asked John.

"We don't seem to be getting any forrader."

"Serves us right, for not having given them Home Rule."

They discussed politics for a few sentences; then Charlotte went to the kitchen leaving John alone with Laura, who asked:

"Why don't you try to get into the House of Commons? You always used to be so keen on it".

John said, "I might. One of these days. It depends".

"What on?"

"Oh, lots of things. Can I have some more coffee?"

She filled his cup for him, and asked another question:

"Is Nan coming over today?"

"No. They've got a shooting party. Gladys is pretty useful with a gun, I believe."

"So is Mr. Willoughby."

"What a matchmaker you are, Lollie!"

Laura Marston laughed.

"It'll be funny, won't it", she went on, "if Nan has a step-father as well as a stepmother?"

"It'll certainly be rather unusual."

"Oh, well, I expect she'll be finding herself a husband fairly soon."

§ 2

Laura, blissfully unaware of the effect her last words had created, rose from the breakfast table.

"I suppose that's true", thought John.

He finished his coffee; filled himself a pipe; lit it; picked up his crutches, and made his way over the bridge to one of his favourite seats. Maurice, gun under arm, the young Labrador joyous at his heels, lounged across from the stables; said, "Five to four I don't even see them"; skirted the home covers, where a few wild pheasants still bred; disappeared for a moment; and reappeared on the path up the hill.

"Decent enough lad really", brooded John. "The country seems to suit him."

Then his thoughts drifted back to Nan.

This last week—he realised suddenly—he had been thinking a great deal about Nan. Somehow or other, she didn't seem too happy. She and Gladys, of course, didn't get on very well. Not that Gladys was a bad sort. All the same—Willoughby! A regular outsider, that chap. Nothing to recommend him except his money.

Briefly—a profiteer.

A pretty bleak prospect for Nan, if—as Laura had hinted—her stepmother were going to marry that profiteer. No wonder she looked a bit down in the mouth. Lucky she had a few hundreds a year of her own.

The crack of Maurice's gun put an end to John's meditation. Looking up, he saw that the shot had killed a rabbit; saw the dog retrieve, bring it to Maurice's hand.

Maurice could do anything with dogs, was going to make a fine shot, an even better horseman. Baldock had taken a great fancy to him. Most people did. Why even Gertrude—a bit long, those days when they had been forced to entertain Gertrude!—couldn't really resist him.

Queer, how he always got round people.

"Even", decided John, "me."

The September sunlight, refracted from the walls of the house, was growing almost too hot. He revelled in it for

another ten minutes ; then bent for his crutches again. How grand it would be to give them up.

"Do a bit of shooting myself then", he thought, as he fixed the crosspieces under his armpits, and swung himself along to the garage where Charlotte had already started up their new car.

"Coming with me to Laxford ?" she asked.

"I should have to get a hat first."

"I'll get it for you, dear."

Leaving her engine running—they had decided it was not worthwhile to spend the extra money for a selfstarter—she ran off into the house. The two horses, hers and Maurice's, stared at him over the low doors of their loose-boxes.

"But I'll never be able to ride", thought continued ; and somehow—perhaps because one of the last things she had said to him was, "It's the summer in the country that always gets on my nerves ; the winter isn't so bad because there's always hunting"—that thought evoked the very image of Nan.

Pretty, she was. Especially when she smiled. Nice, if one could make her just a little bit happier.

"Here we are", called Charlotte, "complete with gent's hatting."

And the image of Nan disappeared.

§ 3

Charlotte still handled her wheel—and her gears—with a novice's trepidation. John chaffed her, "You'd make quite a good undertaker", as they crawled through the gates, and up King's Oak Hill.

"It's only because I'm afraid of frightening you", she chaffed back. "But if your nerves will stand it, mine will." And, breasting the last slope, she scraped into top, pressed for her throttle.

"You win", gasped John after half a mile at a swaying fifty. "Pax."

She slowed down, saying :

"I hate these contraptions. Give me a good pair of horses. But one must go with the times. You'll have to learn to drive when you get that leg of yours".

John asked, "How?" Charlotte said, "Easily"; and proceeded to explain, while he listened, thinking, "She really is an amazing woman. Nothing ever defeats *her*".

Yet one thing had been defeating Charlotte for the best part of a week; and, just before they parked in the Market Place, she had an impulse to broach that thing, to ask him if he were falling in love with Nan Pettigrew.

"If only I could be certain he weren't", she thought; and her heart misgave her, as it had been apt to misgive her ever since she had smiled that, "Of course not, my dear. Come whenever you like".

Second thoughts checked the impulse. Leaving John in the car, she went about her shopping. Maurice wanted more drawing paper. The shopman from whom she bought this said, "There's a picture we've been framing for Sir John, m'lady. Shall I send it along to the car with the other parcel?"

He produced the picture from under his counter. Charlotte's heart misgave her again when she saw that it was one of Maurice's sketches of Nan.

"Not bad, is it?" said John, the frame balanced on his knees when she rejoined him. "He hasn't got the eyes quite right, but the profile's exactly like her. The hair's jolly good, too. I'm going to take it back to Cambridge with me."

Again she checked an impulse, saying casually, "I didn't know Maurice had given you one of them".

"As a matter of fact he didn't. I acquired it by purchase."

"How much?"

"He had the cheek to ask a fiver", chuckled John. "But I refused to part with more than a quid."

The secrecy of the whole transaction—Maurice himself must have taken the sketch to the framemaker's on his bicycle—annoyed her. She remembered that John already possessed Nan's photograph.

"You seem to find the young woman rather decorative", she said casually. But John's, "Well, you must admit she's that", was so obviously not a lover's that her suspicions went to sleep.

He re-wrapped the picture and put it on the floor behind them. She switched on, cranked up and climbed in.

"Any young woman rather than that one", she thought.

Yet why? Nan was a lady. She had a little money. There had never been any scandal about her. John would have to marry one of these days. All the same . . .

"All the same", continued Charlotte's thoughts, "I should hate it."

Because they were so much more than mother and son to each other now.

§ 4

Home again, to find Maurice in a great state of excitement ("I got both the old birds and a brace of young ones"), Charlotte's misgivings dwindled. By the end of the month, John would be back at Cambridge. And John was so steady—the last boy in the world to lose his head.

Watching him throughout lunch, considering him throughout dinner, she reached the conclusion that she had been worrying herself for no reason. But that night John experienced another of his "bad spells".

The thing started—as it always did—a few minutes after he fell asleep. He was in No Man's Land, crawling towards the enemy's wire. Then the lights went up, a machine gun chattered, and a shell sizzled low over the wire, detonated . . .

He half-woke with his tongue between his teeth to the thoughts, "I'm done for. They'll never get me out of this. We're sure to be spotted. I mustn't scream".

Full consciousness followed. The usual muck sweat pulled him out of bed to change his pyjamas. Afterwards, exhausted by the effort, he lay shivering, his hands clenched.

Gradually, his fingers relaxed; groped for the matches, the candlestick on his bedside table. One could always make a better effort with the light on. Only . . . did one want Nan to see?

Match spurted; candle flame dipped, rose, showing him the outline of her picture, propped against the skirting board. He lay staring at her. "Fastidious", he thought, and blew out the candle.

But no sleep came to him; and every effort for selfcom-

posure failed. "Ugly", he kept thinking. "Deformed. Terrified. No use. John Carteret's no use."

At last he dozed, but only to feel the stretcher swaying, only to hear the pash and suck of boots in the mud, the whistle of the shells, the zip-zip of the bullets.

"One of us is bound to get you", shrieked the bullets—and abruptly he was wide awake again, with those two streaks of light between the curtains telling him it must be dawn.

§ 5

Because Nan's picture had seemed to sneer at him, to curl fastidious lips at the sight of his cripplehood lying sleepless in the first light of dawn, John spent most of that day subconsciously dreading his next sight of her—until, towards evening, she telephoned, cheery as ever, to suggest, "Gladys doesn't want the ralli cart tomorrow afternoon. So how about my taking you for a little carriage exercise?"

"Sounds good to me", he said; and that night he slept dreamlessly; and all next morning he was conscious of a strange excitement, altogether pleasurable, being in no way connected with "shell-shock or nerves".

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

§ 1

"GLADYS is being a perfect mule about buying a car", confided Nan, flicking her skittish pony to a trot beyond the lodge gates. "I wish she was more like your mother. In fact she's being rather a pest all round. I don't think I can stick it much longer. Of course I needn't if I don't want to. That's one comfort."

John said, "I should have thought you'd find it jolly lonely, living all by yourself in London".

"Oh, I don't know. I've got plenty of pals."

The pony shied. The rubber tips of John's crutches slithered along the rubber floor of the cart. He gathered them in the crook of one arm.

"Take my whip for a minute", said Nan. "We can arrange them better than that."

Twisting, she propped the crosspieces over the door.

"There", she went on. "Now you needn't be bothered." Then, hesitantly, "I bet you'll be glad when you can scrap them".

"Rather."

"Well, it won't be long now."

They had taken the lower road towards the village.

"You don't mind if we stop at the post office", said Nan. "Gladys is out of stamps. And there's something she wants from the grocer's."

She pulled up opposite the Arms; left him the reins. Mr. Tibbetts lounged out and began a gossip by declaring it was a "niceish sort of day".

"That nephew of mine still doing you all right, Sir John?" he continued.

"Oh, rather", said John.

Mrs. Brabazon, having attended to Nan, also emerged for a

gossip. There were a lot of cubs about. Hounds had been through early that morning. The ground was that hard. And not a leaf turned yet.

"These people haven't changed a bit", said Nan, as she and John drove off again. "Don't they bore you to death?"

"No. I'm not too fond of change."

"But you wouldn't like to put the clock back?"

"Wouldn't I!"

She looked down at his empty trouser-leg; and said, "Sorry. I'd forgotten. Which way shall we go? Up the hill by Smart's Farm or through the valley?"

"Over the hill, don't you think? The view's so much better."

"Right you are."

§ 2

They drove on out of the village. Vaguely uncomfortable and yet vaguely annoyed—no need for him to be so sensitive about his wound—Nan brought the conversation back to her stepmother.

"The real trouble with Gladys", she frowned, "is that she's too fond of money. Hence no motor car—and Mr. Willoughby. You realise she intends to marry the man, I suppose."

"How can you be certain of that?"

"Signs and portents", said Nan smiling. "He'll make a lovely stepfather—I don't think. Let's talk about something a little more pleasant, shall we?"

But for the next quarter of an hour there was little speech in either of them; and when they reached the crossroads at the foot of the hill Nan, insisting they must spare the pony, pulled up, opened the door, and jumped out.

"Don't let Cordelia bolt", she laughed; then, with a touch of seriousness, "Wasn't this the place where Captain Whittinghame took his famous toss?"

Her words must have evoked curious memories. She saw John's face change.

"Somewhere about here", he said casually.

"It was exactly here. I remember your mother telling me." She looked up the hill. "I wonder he didn't kill himself. But of course he was a marvellous horseman. They all were."

Her face changed as she spoke those last three words. But John, apparently, had not heard them.

"Did you like him?" he asked.

"Who?" She had to pull herself together.

"My cousin Rupert."

"Yes. I think so. Of course I never knew him really well."

"I'm jolly glad he never married mother", said John. "Though it's a rotten thing to say now he's dead."

It was the nearest he had ever come to intimacy with her. Looking at him she thought, not for the first time, "I might do worse. But he frightens me a little". He jerked the pony's head from the grass. Walking slowly, one hand on the side of the cart, she asked :

"Why did you tell me?"

Looking at her he thought, "I don't know". Aloud he answered :

"I oughtn't to have. You'll keep it to yourself, won't you?"

"Of course."

Speech failed them again till they reached the top of the hill; and for the rest of their drive it came lightly, intermittently. Only at the very end, with the lodge gates in sight, did any intimacy return.

"I've enjoyed this awfully", said John then. "Could we do it again one of these days?"

"Rather. Next time we'll take a picnic basket. Then we shan't have to be back so early."

"You'll stay and have some tea, of course. And what about a rubber or two afterwards?"

"If you're sure your mother won't mind. I seem to be living at the Manor these days."

"Oh, mother likes her game of bridge just as much as I do."

§ 3

Charlotte, however—Simeon informed John when he and Nan entered the house—had hacked over to Joan Maythorn's, taking Maurice with her; and—Laura being out too—they had the silver tea service and the Gallery to themselves.

Nan was at her brightest again by then.

"I could do so very much worse", she kept thinking. "He's an awful dear, though he is a bit stuffy."

And John thought, "She really is a lovely girl. If only I had a bit more money. If only that bally war hadn't knocked me about so".

They finished tea. Young Matthews brought the cart round.

"You've cheered me up no end", said John, balancing himself on his crutches as she gathered up her reins. "Don't forget our picnic."

"Rather not."

She held out her hand.

"You do get a bit down in the mouth sometimes", she went on. "I've noticed that. Poor dear, I suppose you can't help it. Though it's awfully silly of you. Because you're really one of the lucky ones. Once you get your leg, you'll be as good as ever you were."

"Do you really think so?"

Only her hand, and that slight reassuring nod, answered. Almost at once, she was away down the drive. He watched her bright, bobbed head, the set of her shoulders, till the light cart reached the lake. There she turned, waved her whip.

§ 4

That night, again, John Cartaret dreamed himself in No Man's Land; but managed to wake, to strike his match, before the machine gun chattered. Nan's picture—seen by candle-light—no longer curled fastidious lips at the sight of his cripplehood.

"Once you get your leg", those lips seemed to repeat, "you'll be as good as ever you were."

Half-asleep once more, he heard somebody—could it be himself?—saying:

"But you must wait till then".

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

§ 1

OCTOBER came. John went back to Cambridge. Gladys Pettigrew announced her engagement to Horatio Willoughby. But Nan stayed on at the Grange.

"It might be worse", she wrote to John. "They're not being married till after Christmas. He's liberal enough anyway. He's insisted on buying me a horse. I went out cubbing yesterday. We had quite a good gallop. What a marvellous horsewoman your mother is. Maurice was out, too. He's doing a real picture of me. It ought to be finished by the time you're home. How does the new leg feel?"

The artificial leg gave John a great deal of pain. But he had no more bad spells that term; and every time he looked at Nan's face, there on the wall of his bedrooms, it seemed to give him hope.

A fortnight before the end of term he knew that he was in love with her; that he wanted to marry her. Charlotte—he decided without giving her any hint of his intentions—would be sure to approve.

"Mother as good as confessed she wants a grandson", John used to think. "Only I'd better not say anything. Because if Nan won't have me, I shall feel such a fool."

For the same reason he confided nothing to Herbert, with whom he spent the first two nights of the vacation; though that shrewd observer of men could not help noticing how his nephew's face fell at the news:

"Of course you can be articled to us if you've really made up your mind to be a solicitor. But you'll have to do your three years before we can think of taking you into partnership".

George, interviewed in the office, was sardonic—but admitted that "The title can't do no harm".

"People are just as snobbish as ever they were", he pronounced, dry-shaving his legal chin. "Worse in my opinion. It mightn't be a bad idea if we eventually altered the name of the firm to Sir John Carteret, Bart. and Partners."

Questioned about money, he rubbed his hands, saying: "Now that you've sold all the farms, the London house and most of the family jewellery, I don't see why you shouldn't treat yourself to a new suit every now and again".

John, whose blue serge had been put on for the first time that morning, very nearly blushed.

"Taking a bit more care of his appearance altogether", grunted George to Herbert after their nephew had left the office to catch his train. "Oil on the hair. Moustache clipped soldierly. Do you think there's a lady in the case?"

"If there is", breezed Herbert, "I'm positive his intentions towards her are strictly honourable. By the way he cross-examined me at some length about the comparative speed at which barristers and solicitors succeed in earning a competence."

"Rather significant!" chuckled George.

§ 2

Charlotte, when her eldest son arrived at The Manor, did not immediately notice the change in his appearance. She had seen him without his crutches on her last visit to him at St. Jude's. It was Maurice who called attention, over dinner, to the cut moustache and the smoothed brown hair and the new dinner jacket.

"The head of the house hasn't half smartened himself, up", grinned Maurice. "Where did you get the posh suit from, old man?"

But John was too happy to take offence.

"Treat you to some new clothes, too, if you're a good boy", he said. "How's the new picture of Nan? Finished yet?"

"Pretty well. Are you a buyer?"

"I'll have to see it first."

Charlotte, also—pleased they should chaff each other—was too happy to realise the truth. Even when John told her,

next morning, "I've definitely decided against being a barrister", she accepted the half-truth of his explanation :

"I still stammer occasionally though I've pretty well cured myself of it. But I simply can't get on my hind legs and make a speech. I tried to at the Union the other night. We had a jolly good debate about armaments and the League. I knew exactly what I wanted to say. Of course I'm all for the League. And reducing armaments. Only I simply couldn't get a word out. So I don't suppose I'll ever be able to go in for politics".

She did notice, nevertheless—as they took their first walk through home covers—that his artificial leg gave him considerable pain.

"It hurts like the deuce sometimes", he admitted. "But the doctor says they all do at first. One has to get used to them. If you and Maurice are hunting tomorrow, I'm going to see if I can stand steady enough to pot a rabbit. I gather Maurice has slain most of the five pheasants. How does he ride, by the way?"

"Like an inspired lunatic, I always tell him."

"And"—John paused—"otherwise?"

It took Charlotte a few seconds to understand his meaning. Then she laughed, "Superhumanly virtuous".

"Well"—said her eldest son—"let's hope it lasts."

She told him not to be cynical. He accepted the rebuke.

"Getting the boot from Harrow does seem to have changed him", he admitted. For his old disagreements with Maurice appeared as unimportant as that old urge to be a reformer. Of sole importance, at the moment, loomed his next encounter with Nan.

By the afternoon, accordingly, he had decided to defer his attempt on the rabbits, and told the new boy who fed and groomed the horses—of which there were now three—that he would take out the pony cart and drive himself to the next day's meet.

That afternoon, also, he inspected Maurice's picture of Nan, spending nearly half an hour in the studio before he gave his verdict, "It's a bit too impressionistic for my taste".

Maurice said, with surprising modesty, "That's about all it is, an impression. I never really ought to have started it.

You were quite right about my having to go to a school. One can't teach oneself how to paint".

They walked back to the house—the first time it had ever happened to them—arm in arm.

"It wouldn't cost much for me to live in Paris", went on Maurice. "But I can't see mother allowing me to. So how about London? I believe the Slade's all right. Not that there's any hurry. If you get a chance I wish you'd break the ice with her."

"I will, one of these days."

"Jolly decent of you if you would."

But the promise passed from John's mind almost as soon as he had made it; and, picking up his reins next morning, he might have been both brotherless and motherless—with nobody in the world to consider except himself and Nan.

§ 3

John's mind, as he flicked the pony to a trot beyond the lodge gates, gave him the most perfect picture of his last meeting with Nan. He could almost feel the pressure of her hand.

"Take care of yourself", she had said. "Don't overwork—and write to me occasionally. We'll be seeing one another again at Christmas."

He had written, she had written, so regularly. Once a week always. Some weeks twice. And Nan wasn't the kind of girl who would write all those letters unless . . .

"Unless she cared a bit", decided John.

The pony decided that a walk suited old hoofs better than a trot. He let it have its own way till they were through the village. As he laid a gentle whip across that brown back, dreams were on him, and all the happiness of anticipation.

Nan. His wife!

He would have to wait a bit for that. Till he came down probably. Not very wise to marry while one was still at Cambridge—though of course one could nowadays. With any luck, however, he would obtain honours again and be entitled to his degree by June.

A summer honeymoon. Then a little house—a flat might

be better because they wouldn't have very much money to start with—in London.

He thought about money for a minute or so. They mustn't spend too much. His mother would need the bulk of the income for the Manor. They would spend their holidays with her, of course. And quite a lot of their week ends.

It would be nice for his mother to have Nan about the house. She would be like a second daughter to her. They always got on so well . . .

A hail disturbed him. Doctor Heythrop, who had been cantering along the grass at roadside, reined his steady old black to a jig-jog, asking, "And how's the world with you?"

After a few more sentences, the doctor kicked on again. But at the next turning John was within half a mile of the Goat and Compasses, with now one acquaintance and now another making thought impossible. As he drove up to the inn, he saw Nan herself.

She was just being mounted. He watched her settle herself in the saddle, watched the groom twist the elastic round her boot. How well she looked in her blue habit on that big horse.

She leaned forward to gentle the chestnut neck with a gloved hand; looked up; saw him; smiled, and reined towards the pony cart.

"So you're really back", she said. "How nice."

Hounds came up. Her horse began to fidget.

"Marron Glacé's a bit of a handful", she went on. "Do you like the name I've given him? I think it's rather original. Here's the donor—my prospective stepfather."

Willoughby, on a sedate bay known far and wide as the Bathing Machine, lifted the whip his Gladys had warned him never to call a hunting crop ("It's so frightfully provincial, darling") in a mock salute. Gladys leaned down to shake hands. Charlotte, and Maurice—slightly selfconscious in his ratcatcher coat among all the black and red—trotted up.

John saw his mother wince at Willoughby's, "Hallo, Lady C. Going to give us all a lead again?"

"But we needn't see much of the fellow", he thought, "once I'm married to Nan."

Marron Glacé was still giving Nan trouble as the huntsman

swigged down his stirrup cup and the new master gave the signal to move off.

John, watching her away with the cavalcade, experienced one moment of complete panic before he followed on up the accommodation road to the fringe of Launston Big Wood.

§ 4

Hounds hunted Launston Big Wood for a couple of hours. Then they went away for Brockleby Pastures and John drove home, telling himself that he mustn't be selfish, as Dwight had been when he made Elizabeth promise not to hunt.

"Nan enjoys it as much as mother", he told himself over his luncheon with Laura. "And she's been at it ever since she was a baby. So nothing could possibly happen to her."

All the same it was a positive relief when Maurice rode back late in tell-tale breeches and a dented bowler—Charlotte, with only one horse, had pulled out after the kill in the Pastures—to learn from the answer to his tactful, "You seem to have taken a nice toss. Did anyone else come to grief?" that Nan must be safe.

Charlotte went to bed very early that evening. Maurice fell asleep over a book while John and Laura played chess.

"It isn't often I beat you," said Laura, putting away the pieces. "Your mind must have been wandering."

And of course—thought John—his mind had been wandering. How could one concentrate on a mere game with one's whole life's happiness at stake? Or on one's law books either, if it came to that?

"I must know if she cares for me", he told himself just before he climbed into bed that night. But next morning, somehow or other, it seemed better not to know, because at least one could go on hoping.

He went out with his gun that morning; and actually killed a woodcock, zig-zagging away from him through the bare tree trunks of home covers, with his second barrel. The afternoon he spent in his father's old library—the least used room in the house—pretending to study, but actually listening for the telephone.

Nan, however, did not ring up.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

§ 1

"I shan't ring John up", thought Nan—she also alone that afternoon. "It would be bad staff work. Besides, his mother doesn't like me. She never has."

The thought depressed her. She mooched out to the stables. Horses were nicer than human beings. Easier anyway. Because they had single-track minds.

Who used to say that? Harry of course. O God, why had the Huns killed Harry Rackstraw? He would have married her if he'd come through all right. He'd promised to. Otherwise, she'd never have . . .

Caddish of him? No. She'd just flung herself at his head. Anyway, though, nobody had ever known.

"It's such a long while ago, too", she mused. "All washed out and done with."

Was it, though? Could one love like that again? However much one tried.

Marron Glacé, nuzzling for sugar at the pocket of her tweed coat, seemed to bring comfort. She stayed with him in his loose box for ten minutes—her mind almost a blank.

When she came out, the stable tiles were wet with rain. Fearful for her hair and complexion she ran back into the big ugly house and upstairs to her bedroom.

"I'm getting hard", she thought, staring at herself in her silver mirror on her flounced dressing-table. "But one must be, nowadays. And I *am* fond of John. I'll always do my duty by him. I shan't make him a bad wife—whatever his mother thinks."

A gong rang to warn her that it was tea time. She went downstairs. In the drawing room, her mother and Willoughby sat side by side on the sofa before the fire. She knew they had

been holding hands, kissing. How could Gladys let herself be kissed by a man of that age? But then father hadn't been young either.

He had been a gentleman, though. He hadn't stayed at home piling up money while there was a war on. She must always remember that John had gone to the war.

Poor John. He must have had a hell of a time—with his leg, with his stammer. He deserved to be happy.

Easy enough to make him happy. He was so unsophisticated, so ignorant about women. He would never dream . . . And of course one would never tell him. Only fools confessed.

Her stepmother and Willoughby were discussing their wedding plans.

"April", said Gladys. "I want to finish the season."

"You're jolly sure of me, aren't you, young woman? Supposing I changed my mind?"

"Well, if it comes to that, supposing I did?"

They spatted on—with occasional contacts. Nan finished her muffin and left them to it. A sudden impulse took her to the nursery. Children—like horses—were easy company. How nice—how thrilling—to have a child of one's very own.

She stayed playing with her little half-sister for the best part of an hour. Once, she heard the telephone ring—and stopped the play, thinking, "It may be John".

§ 2

But neither Thursday nor Friday brought Nan any message from John. He was not at Saturday's meet; and, although she broke her habit and went to church on Sunday, he was not there either.

"The head of the house has a cold in his head", announced Maurice, detaining her at the lych gate. "When are you coming over to let me finish my picture? How about to-morrow?"

"No. I shall be hunting."

"Aren't you lucky? You've got horses to burn. I'm only allowed three days a fortnight."

Charlotte was talking to Mrs. Heythrop.

"I wish we could have some dancing", went on Maurice.
"These long evenings fairly get my tail down."

"I thought you were being such a good boy now!"

"Lack of opportunity", he grinned. "There isn't a Canoe Club in Laxford, worse luck. Otherwise I'd invite you there."

Nan grinned back, "When I take to kidnapping, I'll drop you a postcard"; and hesitated a moment over her, "I could manage Tuesday morning. About eleven o'clock. That'll be the last sitting, won't it?"

"Yes. Only it may be rather a long one. I shall want you for at least two hours."

He called over to Charlotte, "I say, mother, will it be all right if Nan has lunch with us on Tuesday?"; and she called back, "Yes, dear. Of course it will".

"Tophole." He turned to Nan again. "Make it half-past ten if you can. I've a lot of things I want to alter. Any message for John?"

"Oh, give him my love", said Nan casually. "And tell him I hope his cold will soon be better."

Maurice accompanied her to her stepmother's car—Willoughby's Christmas offering. Gladys, already seated inside, asked, "Did you forget to wash your upper lip, or is that a moustache you're trying to grow?"

"It does need a spot of top dressing", admitted Maurice. "But the poor thing's only had a week. So you mustn't expect too much."

As they drove away, Gladys remarked, "That youth's going to be positively devastating when he's a year or two older. Isn't he tall? And what a figure".

But her next remark, "If only he *were* a year or two older, and didn't happen to be a younger son, you might consider him", drove all thought of Maurice from Nan's mind.

"Does that imply", she asked, with a flash of the temper she had learned to control during the war years, "that I shan't be too popular if I'm found on the premises after April? Because if it does, don't worry. I can always go and live in London."

"Or Cambridge, darling."

They stared at each other. Then Nan laughed :

"That's rather intelligent of you".

Gladys said, "I was watching him that day he came to the meet. It stuck out a foot. What do you propose doing about it? Are *you* in love with *him*?"

Nan hesitated. Gladys wasn't a bad sort. It would be nice to confide in somebody. But second thoughts, the exercise of a little imagination, and a natural aversion to plain truths, made her say :

"Enough to marry him if he asks me".

Because, having said that much, one would look such a fool if one didn't eventually marry him, Nan experienced the sensation of having burned her boats.

§ 3

All the rest of that Sunday, Nan told herself, "I've got to go through with it". And on the Monday evening—she had ridden her hardest that day—she asked for a fire to be lit in her bedroom, pretending that she felt the cold.

"I believe it's going to freeze tomorrow", she said.

"Nuisance if it does", said Gladys, kissing her good night.

"We've only got two more days before Christmas."

The bright fire tempted one to indulge in sentiment. Nan undressed and sat down in front of it.

"It's no good waiting for that sort of love", she thought after a long while. "There'll never be anybody as handsome, or as brave, or as gay. There'll never be anybody I can go absolutely crazy about. I've proved that, haven't I, Harry darling. You know I've been . . . faithful to you."

Then she rose, and took her flat jewelbox from its shelf in the dress cupboard; unlocked it with the key that never left her even when she was in the hunting field; took that one photograph, those few letters—and dropped them straight into the flames.

"Finis", she said to herself, glad that they should burn so quickly.

Yet in the night she dreamed she drove home from hunting

with Harry Rackstraw, and that he was telling her a story—rather a scandalous story—about Rupert Whittinghame.

It was rare for Nan to remember her dreams. But all the time Maurice was putting the last touches to his picture next morning, she remembered that one. And just after lunch she recollected—altogether curiously—the actual scene which preceded that long-ago drive home from hunting, and the very words Harry had used, the very look on his face as he said, “Is he a chap who used to be in the D.G.’s? Lanky sort of bloke, with curly gold hair?”

Damn Harry. Why could she never quite stop thinking about him? He was dead. All that pre-war past was dead. No one knew. No one ever would know. Because she had never let on to *anybody*.

Not even to her best friend. Not even to Elizabeth. That day, when Elizabeth found her crying by the sundial of the Manor in the little rose garden between the privet hedges.

§ 4

That winter afternoon, there were no leaves on the privet hedges; and no blooms on the pruned rose trees. But the gnomon of that selfsame dial still marked the time; and John called Nan’s attention to the shadow creeping across the lip of the plate.

“It’s almost as accurate as my watch”, he said. “Look. Just ten minutes to three. It’s nice to have sunshine in the afternoon at this time of the year. We don’t get it very often.”

“It won’t last long. Oughtn’t you to be in the house? I thought your cold——”

“Oh, that’s cured. They never last long with me. Nan——”

He hesitated, looking this way and that over the square tops of the hedges.

“Nan——”

“Yes, John.” Her blue eyes were steady.

“There’s something I want to ask you.”

He hesitated again. The sundial was still between them.

But in another minute he had edged round it, so that the whole plate was in shadow.

"It's ser-ser-something fer-fer-frightfully important", he continued.

His mouth worked. His right hand caught her by the elbow. Her whole heart softened to him. "The poor darling", she thought. "He's so nervous."

"John", she heard herself say—and the blue eyes were as unsteady as the brown, "don't stammer. There's nothing to be nervous about. I know what you want to tell me."

His hand hurt her. Everything hurt her. Why couldn't she love him? Why could she only feel sorry for him? He deserved a woman who would really love him. He was like her father. Like his own father. So decent. So kind. So honest. Such a gentleman.

A ghost—her own—moved behind her. She could hear the ghost crying, "Only because I've been such a fool. Only because I've got too much imagination. Only because it would be so damned unfair, because I couldn't bear it if . . ."

The ghost sidled away. She heard John's voice again, the stammer gone from it, though he spoke very slowly.

"Nan. Does that mean . . . that you . . . care for me?"

Thank God, he had used that word. She might not love him, but she did "care". She would make him a good wife. Maybe a better wife than some girl who . . .

"You do care", he persisted.

"Isn't that fairly obvious"—her eyes were steady once more—"from the fact that I've done most of the proposing?"

Then relief rippled out in laughter; and she let him kiss her—such dear, clumsy kisses—on the lips.

§ 5

Charlotte saw them emerge from the rose garden; saw John's hand close over Nan's as they approached the bridge.

"Mother", he began, "we've got something to tell you."

One gust of rage blew hot on Charlotte's face. One shiver of apprehension ran icy down her backbone.

But John spoke so happily. His eyes were so bright, so

utterly confident. So what could a mother do, what could she say ?

One had to say, "Well, I think you're two very lucky young people". One had to kiss Nan. One had to tell Maurice, when he crossquestioned one after John had insisted on accompanying Nan back to the Grange, "Of course I'm glad they're going to be married".

§ 6

Only very late that night did Charlotte remember the first real fear she had ever experienced.

And then only vaguely, as a voice chaffing, "Always the great lady, aren't you, mother ?"

For even as Maurice had done, so Rupert might have chaffed her, dark eye winking disbelief.

CHAPTER FIFTY

§ 1

LOUISA Carteret's parlourmaid opened the door of the big drawing room which overlooked Regent's Park, still brown from the long drought; went over to Charlotte, who was lying on the sofa with the biography of the moment, and announced:

"Lady Carteret is on the telephone, m'lady. She wants to know if you'd mind her making dinner for seven-thirty as Mr. Maurice is going on to a party afterwards".

"Tell her that will be quite all right."

The maid went out. Louisa, sitting short-skirted on her favourite chair, remarked:

"It seems funny to think they've been married nearly a year. Isn't it nice they're so happy? I do wonder, though, why there isn't any news of a baby."

"There is", said Charlotte; and Louisa's fine eyes glistened.

"When?"

"According to the best stable information, the happy event should occur before the middle of next March."

"Nearly"—Louisa ticked them off on her fingers—"six months."

She became vaguely obstetric, amusing Charlotte with her almost complete ignorance, till the parlourmaid brought in tea.

"I'll bet John's pleased", she said then. "How did you find out? Did he write and tell you?"

"No. She did."

"So dutiful", thought Charlotte, "our Nan."

Presently Louisa sat down to write a letter, and she picked up her book again. But her thoughts would not allow her to read.

Why had she never liked Nan? Why had this last year,

and the months preceding it, been so difficult? And why didn't Nan like her?

"I've done everything I could", she mused. "Always. Ever since that day John told me of their engagement."

But then—so had Nan. One couldn't find the faintest fault with her conduct either. Look at what she was doing for Maurice. Would any other young wife have said, "It'll be much too expensive for him to live in London on his own. Besides, he's too young. So why shouldn't he have our spare room?"

And hadn't Nan gone out of her way to be pleasant with that, "I'm afraid you'll be lonely without him"?

Wasn't that the real trouble, though? They always had to go out of their way to be pleasant. Both of them. Nothing they said to each other could ever be quite spontaneous. They lived in a state of armed neutrality.

Why were they even polite to each other?

Only because of John.

§ 2

Herbert, breezing home earlier than his habit, was full of John.

"He's the most amazing worker", said Herbert. "I'd never have believed anyone could pick up the ropes so quickly. And he actually got us a case the other day. Not much money in it. Working-class stuff. But rather good from a publicity point of view. And there's an interesting question of law involved."

Interrupted by Louisa with the family news, he became breezier than ever, and pronounced, "Happy is he who has a quiver full".

This misquotation Charlotte did not trouble to correct, because Herbert, verging onto his sixties, was growing both pompous and intolerant. One couldn't deny, however, either his astuteness or his use.

Thanks to this new house of his, she no longer needed a hotel when she came up to London. Thanks to his handling of investments—though she still had to be very careful—the worst of her pinchings and scrapings were over.

But how scornful Philip and Elizabeth had been, when they crossed over for John's wedding, because the Manor only boasted two bathrooms and was still without electric light.

Charlotte found herself thinking a lot about Elizabeth and more about Philip when—some half an hour later—she went upstairs to dress.

They were dutiful, too. They wrote with almost monotonous regularity—Elizabeth about her three little girls, about her house at Fox Croft in the Radnor country, and how she had taken up hunting again, "some of the going's almost as good as it is at home; they gallop like the devil and they don't care what they pay for their horses"—Philip about "airplanes" and a "marvellous new invention, the loudspeaking radio", which sounded most unpleasant and noisy.

But did either of them really love her? Would it matter to them if they never saw her again?

Upbraiding herself for the access of sentiment, she ran the comb through her bobbed hair, in which the gray seemed to be increasing; and put on a tea gown.

The temperature of the September evening was so oppressive that she did not even need a wrap. Herbert—the man certainly was useful—had kept his car for her. She stepped in and was driven rapidly to the little house in Royal Avenue, Chelsea, which Nan had chosen, "Because the trees and things look so nice and French".

One of Nan's two servants opened the door. Herbert's chauffeur handed her out; and explained that he would be unable to fetch her—a fact she already knew from his employer's, "Can't keep the chap up late, you know, otherwise he won't be able to take me to the office tomorrow".

Mentally girding on her customary armour, she was ushered into the narrow hall and up the steep beige-carpeted stairs to the drawing room. Nan was on her feet by the baby grand piano, which Maurice had just been fingering. As Nan came across the room and kissed her, Charlotte was aware of the most curious sensation.

Her entire armour seemed to be dropping off!

She returned the kiss, and put both her hands—spontaneously if a little stiffly—on her daughter-in-law's shoulders.

"How are you, my dear?" she asked.

Nan said—she, too, experiencing that sensation of complete disarmament, "Grand. Would you believe it, I haven't been sick once. Biarritz was simply divine. I did like your letter. It seemed silly to write until we were absolutely certain. Are you really pleased?"

"Delighted."

"John knew you would be. He won't be long. He only got in a quarter of an hour ago."

"And when", interrupted Maurice, who had also risen, "do I get my kiss?"

He put his arms round his mother. His flaxen moustache brushed her cheek. In full evening dress with one of the new narrow white waistcoats and a red carnation at his button-hole, it seemed impossible that he should be so young, not yet twenty. Impossible, also, even though he was so tall, with that supercilious way of looking at one, of speaking to one, to believe . . .

But Nan was talking again, and that very old fear stood away.

"Has the drought been as bad as the papers make out?" asked Nan.

"Every bit. When I left, the village was still taking its Sunday joints to the baker to have them cooked. But we're still able to have our baths at the Manor. And the stable well hasn't given out yet. Though it's lower than Matthews ever remembers it; and the farmers have spent a perfect fortune carting water for their beasts."

John came in on the end of the sentence. He carried a tray of cocktails; and set it down on the top of the piano before he also kissed his mother.

"Only just managed it", he said. "I didn't leave the office till nearly a quarter to seven. Confound you and your parties, Maurice. I should have thought you'd had enough dancing to last you a lifetime while we were in France."

Maurice merely grinned.

"You really ought to have come with us, mother", went on John.

"Perhaps I will next time", said Charlotte, thinking of

those lonely three weeks with Laura, and Gertrude, who grew more crabby, less reconciled to post-war conditions with every passing year.

§ 3

Dinner was punctual to the minute, well cooked and adequately served. Maurice chattered all the time—of his work, of his music (a new craze), of how much French he had learned.

"Almost too much", put in Nan, winking at Charlotte. "You should have seen the number of dictionaries he picked up. But you liked the pocket Spanish one best, didn't you?"

Maurice flushed.

"She was only about five feet high", went on Nan. "They looked so funny dancing the tango together. She had the most marvellous eyes. And did she know how to use them. John and I were quite worried. These young artists are so susceptible."

John said, "Leave off ragging the poor chap. You're making him feel quite uncomfortable".

"That would be a nice change", smiled Nan, adding, "Do you know what we've nicknamed him, 'The Great Unsquashed'?"

With coffee just on the table, Maurice looked at his watch and made his excuses. Three minutes later, the front door banged.

"He never could close a door like an ordinary human being", thought John. "Let's hope he isn't going to stay with us forever." But to say anything of the sort to his wife or mother—he realised—would be unwise.

Nan had never made any secret of her feelings for Maurice. She liked him "enormously". And Charlotte appeared so sure of his enduring reformation, it seemed heartless to disillusion her. Besides, there was really no harm in the lad. He just had a different code to one's own.

"One must be fair", brooded John, asking permission to light his pipe. "One must remember that this is nineteen twenty-one, and that he's got the artistic temperament, what-

ever that may mean. Still, he might be down in time for breakfast occasionally. Nan shouldn't spoil him like she does. I really ought to speak to her about it."

But perhaps, now that Nan was going to have a baby, that would be unwise too.

"She mustn't be worried about anything", he decided; and from that—alone for a little—he fell to thinking of her loveliness and how lucky he was to have such a wife.

An ideal wife, really. From that day, nearly two years ago, when she had consented to marry him, right up to this evening, they had never had a single dispute, far less a quarrel. She was clever, too. Look how well and how economically she ran this house. And people liked her so much. She made friends so quickly. They were hardly ever without company.

Pity, of course, that they couldn't manage to see more of his mother. Originally he had planned that they should spend all their holidays and most of their week ends with her. But Nan was quite right. A summer holiday out of England did one more good; took one's mind off one's job. And—quite apart from the fact that a visit to the Manor meant taking at least one meal at the Grange with that odious Willoughby—the railway fare was a consideration.

If only decent motor cars weren't so dear!

§ 4

John knocked out his pipe and went upstairs. Both the drawing room windows were wide open. His mother and Nan stood on the little narrow balcony. As he joined them, he heard his mother say, "You're quite right. It looks just like a little *place* in some French provincial town. But don't you miss the country sometimes?"

Nan said, "I would like to hunt again. Only I shan't be able to this winter, shall I?"

"Hardly", laughed Charlotte; while Nan thought, "She's being so different. I believe I could be really fond of her if she'd let me. What a wonderful-looking woman she is. I bet I don't look as well at her age".

John said, "Mind you don't catch cold in that thin dress, darling. I think you'd better come inside".

Charlotte said, with a touch of the known and resented brusquerie, "If you start coddling the girl now, what'll you be doing by February? Nobody could catch cold on a night like this. Get me a cigarette and leave off fussing".

Alone with Nan while he fetched box and matches she whispered, "His father used to be just the same. Approaching parenthood always stimulated his imagination".

Nan whispered back, "Imagination isn't John's long suit either"; and for the first time their eyes met in a look of almost complete understanding.

"I've never quite given her credit", mused Charlotte, "for her brains."

John brought the cigarettes and she lit up. Nan wouldn't smoke. "I never really cared for it", she said. "And the doctor tells me it's just as well not to."

They stood talking for several more minutes.

"Have you read the evening papers?" asked John. "There's been a most ghastly explosion in Germany. Two thousand killed and wounded, my paper says. Isn't life queer? A few years ago we should have thought that good news."

In the little pause which followed, Nan said, "I'm afraid I still do"; and fell silent, biting her lips.

John refused to take the remark seriously. Nan, after another pause, rode him off with a quiet, "All right. Have it your own way, darling. Perhaps I didn't mean it. Only I never shall like them". But Charlotte felt that she had spoken in deadly earnest, under the stress of an emotion she could not restrain.

Presently, talking of other things, they moved back into the drawing room and the maid brought drinks. John took a whiskey and soda; his mother half a glass of barley water. Watching them, talking to them, Nan thought:

"I wonder why I blew up like that. I wonder what I'd have said if John had asked me why I loathe the Germans so much. Of course I could always have said it was because of father".

A little later she caught herself thinking, "It isn't nearly as

bad as I used to imagine it might be. John's such a dear. He's so easy to manage. I really must forget Harry. I do as a rule. It's only when I let myself get emotionalised. I'm all stirred up tonight. I'd better pretend I'm tired and go to bed. His mother will like having John to herself for a bit. She really is a jolly good sort. I'm beginning to wish I hadn't kept them apart so much".

So Nan made her excuses, leaving her husband and his mother alone.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

§ 1

To Charlotte, her daughter-in-law's parting words, "You'd better sleep in your dressing-room tonight, darling. I'm most frightfully tired, and I'm sure you and your mother will have heaps to talk about", seemed to symbolise the whole change in their relationship. With the promise of a child, they were no longer armed neutrals, but allies.

The thought warmed her. Warming, too, was the knowledge that each of them had kept the secret of their old antipathy from John.

Such a simple young man, her John. No finesse, no subtlety about him. How he would stare if she were to admit, "I disliked the idea of your marrying Nan just as much as you disliked the idea of my marrying Rupert, but now I'm quite reconciled to it".

The girl had made no admission either.

"Give her full marks", thought Charlotte, "for that."

John lit another pipe, settled himself in his armchair, and began to talk about his work.

"George and Herbert are being jolly decent to me", he said. "In another year I shall be through my final. Though, mind you, the practical work's a very different kettle of fish from exams."

"But you still like the work?"

"Rather. Only it's a bit depressing sometimes."

"In what way?"

"Well—a solicitor's office isn't exactly the place for strengthening one's faith in human nature."

He elaborated his point; giving her a few details—without naming the clients—of a divorce case, of a blackmail case in which they were acting.

"Let justice be done though the heavens fall", he quoted, adding, "Unless you can afford to employ Carteret and Carteret. Only don't see Uncle George if you're really in trouble."

"Herbert", put in his mother, "being the more modern."

"Not to say—hot stuff."

He elaborated that point also, but not without admiration.

"Herbert's never on the wrong side of the law", he continued. "But he sails just as close to the wind as possible. And after all, why not? That's what lawyers are for. Life isn't a Sunday school."

"So we're becoming a little cynical."

"No. Only commonsensible."

"Gentle as the dove and wise as the serpent", suggested Charlotte.

"Only up to a point." John hesitated, his brown eyes serious, cuddling his warm pipe bowl in a mottled hand.

"I don't suppose it's easy for a woman to understand", he went on. "But a man's bound to develop two codes—one for office use and one for home."

"What you really mean", smiled Charlotte, "is that everybody has to grow up."

He took her point without any elaboration. His eyes remained serious.

"But growing-up's rather a painful process", he said slowly. "And theoretically a double code implies deterioration. Either a thing's right, or it's wrong."

"In one's own judgment. But is one's own judgment infallible? Can you deny the whole doctrine of expediency?"

"I'd like to."

"Puritan."

"I suppose so." A gleam of humour lit the contracted pupils. "Isn't it lucky I've decided not to go in for politics?"

"Perhaps you will, one day."

"Not I. I'm far too happy."

He fell silent; and her heart warmed again as she appraised him, as she remembered the son who had come back to her from the war.

She had not heard John stammer, she had not heard him complain about his missing leg or "these rotten nerves of

mine", since his marriage. He was always careful of his appearance nowadays. He had even lost some of his clumsiness.

Full marks for Nan again. One simply must not let oneself be jealous.

"It was a form of jealousy", she said to herself. "I didn't want to let him go. I wanted to keep him all mine."

Aloud she said, unwontedly tender, "I'm so glad, my dear", and, just as she spoke, the telephone rang, sharply insistent, from the hall.

"Confound the thing." John rose. "I did want Nan to have a really long night and this house is so small she always hears it".

He moved quickly for the door.

Watching him go, Charlotte thought of his leg again. It really was extraordinary that he had learned to walk so well. A moment later, however, she was listening all ears.

John came back scowling.

"Maurice", he began.

"Forgotten his latchkey, I gather."

"And wants me to hang one inside the letter box for him. Told me exactly how to do it, too. He oughtn't to have a latchkey at his age."

"I'm afraid he's being a bit of a bother to you."

"Bother!" began John, and stopped.

The scowl changed to a smile. He looked at his young wife's photograph, large in its tortoiseshell frame on the piano.

"Not really", he went on. "It's only that I'm . . . just a little intolerant. He and Nan get on famously. If it were anybody else I'd be quite jealous of him. I say, you don't mind if I go up and see if she's still asleep. I'd better cope with that key at once, too. Otherwise I might forget it."

He went out again, closing the door behind him. Charlotte heard him creep upstairs, pause outside Nan's door, creep down once more. As she picked up the evening paper, she remembered three phrases from their conversation.

"Puritan", she remembered. "I'm far too happy." "If it were anybody else, I'd be quite jealous."

Despite the warmth of the evening, a curious apprehension sent one cold shiver down her spine.

§ 2

"Silly of me", thought Charlotte Carteret, only just recollecting her one cold shiver when—some three quarters of an hour later—John kissed her goodbye and handed her into the taxicab for which he had telephoned. "Nothing to worry about. On the contrary."

Back at Regent's Park, however, with a wind rising over London and her windows rattling, she could not sleep.

Apprehension renewed itself. Vaguely haunted by the memory of just such another night, more than nine years away from her, spent in her old bedroom at Hendersons, she told herself:

"Balance. Proportion. Even when one loves people".

But though this calmed her, she could not close her eyes for a long time.

Towards two o'clock the needed rain fell at last, and she imagined the brown turf of the park outside drinking it gratefully.

"I'm always happier in the country", she thought; then, "I was only afraid because I love John so much, because I couldn't bear it if anything were to mar his happiness".

Yet still sleep would not quite come to her; and presently, drowsily, she began to think about Maurice, to wonder if he were home yet, to wish that Maurice were steadier, more like John.

"Why", asked that first real fear she had ever experienced, "should there be this tremendous difference in character between Maurice and John?"

And, with dawn just showing through the curtains, the eyes of her mind conjured up, almost as though he were alive in this actual room, the picture of Maurice in full evening dress with the red carnation at his buttonhole bending to brush her cheek with his flaxen moustache.

Then someone, could it be herself, began whispering, "Be sure your sin will find you out"; and suddenly she was wide awake, sitting upright, clicking on the lamp.

"No!" she heard herself—and this time there could be no doubt it was herself—whispering to the woman whose face

she could just see in a far wall-mirror by the light of that lamp. "No! No! It isn't true."

Cruel—if that very old fear should have come true? Because one could never be quite certain. Because there would always be another, an easier, a more comforting explanation . . .

"Throw-back", she insisted to herself. "Mother's half a Whittinghame."

But the mere insistence seemed to show that, for the future, she would have to reckon with this fear, not as a vague, intermittent, scarcely conscious suspicion, but as a permanent influence, and perhaps a permanently malevolent influence, behind her every consideration of, her every action towards, Maurice.

§ 3

Curiously, nevertheless, Charlotte experienced—from that night onwards—a heightened sense of responsibility towards Maurice, and with this sense a distinct renewal of the tenderness she had felt for him in his babyhood.

"Not his fault", she used to think.

Such thoughts changed her. And during the months which followed, even the unimaginative John was occasionally conscious of this change.

"Don't you notice", he asked Nan, on their way back to London after spending Christmas and New Year at the Manor, "that mother's different?"

"In what way, darling?"

"Well—she's a good deal more tolerant for one thing. Don't you agree with me?"

He turned to Maurice for confirmation; and Maurice nodded, thinking:

"I should jolly well say she was. A nice hole I'd be in if she hadn't let me have fifty quid. Cuss that girl. Why couldn't she get herself out of her own mess? I'm too soft with them, too much the little gentleman. That's my trouble. I wish I'd never fallen in love with her. Falling in love's the very devil".

And, "I'm not going to give the wench a cent more", continued Maurice's thoughts as the express rushed onwards.

For the extraction of that cheque—and his mother's promise not to tell John—had not been too easy. "Charlotte", as he now called her in his own mind, had read him "one hell of a lecture".

He could always get round her, though. He could get round anybody—even John—if he really laid himself out to.

A clever chap, this Maurice!

And was he going to be a painter? You bet he was. Some painter, too. Wait till he had his own money. (Not much more than a year now.) Wait till he'd studied in Paris.

Gosh. Paris! On his absolute own. Nobody to ask, "And what time did you come home, young man?"

Not that John would be able to ask those kinds of questions very much longer. Once the baby arrived there'd be no room for him in Royal Avenue.

Lovely to be on one's own—even though Charlotte, instead of letting him have a flat, insisted he must go into lodgings.

Still, he would miss Nan. One of the very best. And plucky. He'd be scared to death at the idea of having a baby.

Come to think of it—decided Maurice—Nan was really a damn sight too much of a sport and a damn sight too pretty, for John.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

§ 1

THE calendar on the desk which took up most of the tiny room John called "my study" indicated that it was the thirteenth of March, nineteen twenty-two. Dawn had not yet broken. Outside, the leafless branches of the trees in Royal Avenue swayed to a spring gale.

For the fiftieth time, John went to the door; opened it; listened. For the hundredth time he thought, "Why didn't that fool of a doctor give us any warning? Then mother could have got to London in time".

Not that his mother could do anything. Nobody could do anything except that man who had gone upstairs with that beastly bag of his. And nurse.

How long since the doctor had gone upstairs with nurse? An hour? Two hours?

God knew. One had lost count of time. But it couldn't be so very long. And the man had kept his car waiting. That poor devil of a chauffeur. What about asking him in for a drink?

"Be somebody to talk to anyway", thought John. "Lose my nerve if I'm not careful. Had too much pain myself not to realise what she must be going through. The guts she's got. Not a whimper."

He went out of the room along the narrow hall to the front door, and down the steps to the doctor's car.

"I'm afraid you're having rather a long wait", he said to the chauffeur. "Won't you come in and have a tot of whiskey?"

"Thank you very much, sir."

The man dismounted, followed John indoors. The hall light showed him stocky, blue-eyed, clean-shaven, with a curious malformation of the cheek, obviously the result of a

war wound. As they went towards the study, John noticed that he limped.

"What were you in?" he asked once they were seated.

"London Fusiliers, sir." The man gave the number of his battalion. "Got my little packet at Wipers."

"Funny", said John. "That's where I got mine. Say when?"

"Only a splash, sir. I don't usually drink when I'm on duty."

The soda fizzed into the two glasses.

"Well, here's luck, sir."

"The same to you. How long were you in hospital?"

"About six months. They thought they'd have to take my leg off. But they managed to save it in the end."

"That was lucky. They chopped mine off at Boulogne."

"Did they, though. One'd never know it from the way you walk, sir."

But John's thoughts were with Nan again; and the man seemed to know it. For presently he said, "First time, isn't it, sir? Puts the wind up one a bit. My missus had her two while I was at the front. I wasn't half-glad when I got me telegrams. But you'll be all right"—the sharp eyes indicated the ceiling—"with him".

"You really think so?"

"Sure as I sit here, sir. The doctor's a regular wizard. Three nights ago it was twins. And the nurse told me afterwards he handled 'em something lovely."

Despite his anxiety, John laughed.

His nerves seemed steadier. Everything would be all right. Everything must be all right. After all, the doctor himself had said there were no complications. If only it weren't for the pain. If only Nan hadn't been biting her lips so hard—such lovely lips!—the last time he had seen her, just before nurse had sent him to the telephone and told him to keep out of the room.

How long since then? It seemed like a lifetime. Why had he let his two servants stay in bed? He couldn't keep this fellow gossiping till the baby was born.

"Gasper?" he heard himself ask.

"Thank you, sir. But I'm not a smoker. I'd better be

getting back to me car, if you've no objection. There's some rummy blokes about these days. Might pinch the doctor's rug or something. Bless my soul", his eyes turned to the uncurtained window, "if that doesn't look like one of 'em."

John laughed again. For the figure of the tall youth peering at the car was unmistakable.

"I shouldn't worry", he said. "That happens to be my brother."

But his lips were grim when he opened the front door to greet Maurice.

§ 2

"Scotland Yard isn't in it with me," said Maurice, helping himself to three fingers out of the whiskey decanter. "From the corner of King's Road I perceive a car. Immediately my brain is on ice. It functions like lightning. Please observe the mixed metaphor. 'Nan', I say to myself, 'is about to produce the heir to the Carteret baronetcy.' This not being expected, there will be nobody to hold my dear brother's hand until the happy event takes place. Accordingly, *me voici*."

"Drunk", suggested John.

"Perhaps a trifle inebriated. But drunk—no."

Maurice sat down, shifting a few papers before he did so, on the desk.

"You don't seem particularly pleased to see me", he went on, fidgeting at the pin which clipped his blue collar. "It's a pity you don't like me better. But what the hell? God gives us our relations."

John, even Nan forgotten in the sudden blaze of annoyance, said, "You are tight. Or you wouldn't talk such bilge".

"In vino veritas", grinned Maurice. "What's the use of getting ratty? You're a damn good fellow. It's not your fault that you don't like me. You try hard enough. I do, too, if it comes to that. So it isn't my fault either. It's just—what the blazes do the Yanks call it?—incompatibility of temperament. You can kick me out as soon as I've had my drink. But I'd rather you didn't. Not till the bell rings anyway. Sorry. I didn't mean to put it like that."

His face twitched. Suddenly he seemed sober.

"Sorry", he repeated. "How is she? Has the doctor been here long? When do you think it'll happen? I bet you've been bloody worried. So was I when I saw that bus. That's why I couldn't keep away—though I knew you'd spot I'd had one over the odds."

As he spoke John's annoyance dwindled. The skin at the corners of his brown eyes wrinkled to the semblance of a smile.

"Let me stay", pleaded Maurice, his eyes—so dark that they looked almost black—very serious. "I won't make a row or anything."

And just at that moment both of them heard the ghost of a cry.

"Was that . . . it?" asked Maurice.

"I don't know. It may have been."

"They always cry when they're born, I believe. Why don't you go and see?"

"All right. I will."

John tiptoed through the door, out into the hall and up the staircase. Alone, Maurice said to himself, "You nearly made the world's worst bloomer this journey. Too much self-expression. That's another of your troubles. The head of the house is pre-war. Get that into your thick head, and keep the old tongue from wagging".

Meanwhile John Carteret stood very still, halfway up that second flight of stairs under that slip of a window which Nan had wanted him to enlarge when they took the house.

He was conscious of a grayness beyond that window, of the night passing—and fear with the night. He was certain—though his reason wrestled with that certainty—of a new life in this house where he and Nan had been so happy. He found himself praying—as he had not prayed since his boyhood—for a blessing on the new life, and for a continuance of his own happiness. He thought stupidly, "I'm glad it's happened here in our own home. I hope it's a boy. I hope he'll never have to go through what our generation went through. It shan't be my fault if he does".

But, so thinking, fear touched him again; and he found himself praying once more, voicelessly, as he had once prayed under shell fire . . . till someone touched him on the arm.

§ 3

"You've been a hell of a time", grumbled Maurice when John at last came back to the study. "Has anything gone wrong?"

For the first and only time in his life the elder brother had a wild desire to pull his youngest brother's leg.

"Prepare yourself for the worst", he began. Then, unable to restrain himself, "Wrong. Rather not. Have another drink. I'm going to. Nurse says everything went off like clockwork. It's a boy, too. What do you think of that? How about your staying to breakfast?"

He tipped the last of the decanter into their two glasses.

"This will make me tight", protested Maurice.

"Nonsense. A little drop like that couldn't do anybody any harm. What are we going to do about mother? Ring her up?"

"At this time in the morning."

"Perhaps you're right. We could send her a telegram though."

"All right. Let's."

§ 4

The telegram from London read, "Carteret succession assured weight seven and a half pounds both doing well only knew it was going to occur about midnight didn't want to worry you love to granny"; and Charlotte caught the first train to town.

"I gather Maurice was here when it happened", she said within three minutes of entering the house.

"How on earth did you know that?" asked John.

"From the wire of course. You'd have been so much more economical. Was he here the whole time? Did you ring him up and ask him to come round?"

John hesitated, but not for long.

"It was just luck", said John. "He saw the doctor's car outside. Would you like to come up and have a look at the baby at once? You can if you want to. Nan'll be asleep again, I expect. I've only had a couple of words with her."

But Nan's eyes opened as John and his mother entered the room; and at last her mind seemed quite clear.

"My baby", thought Nan as she watched Charlotte stoop over the cradle. "That's all I married your son for. You can have John back if you like. You've always loved him—and I never have. Only keep your hands off *my* son. I couldn't bear to see you touch him. I can't bear the idea of your coming between him and me. I've always hated you. Hated you."

John kissed her on the forehead before he went away; and this new hatred, this new jealousy, seemed to embrace him also. She had never wanted John to kiss her. In all her life, she had only wanted one man's kisses.

Yet her lips smiled the old acquiescence when she said—two days later: "Of course he'll have to be called John. You all are. Only I would like him to have a second name. I'd like him to be christened John Harold. You don't mind, do you, darling?"

Neither did she protest when John said—about two months after that:

"I'm a little bored with that dressing room of mine. It's beginning to seem rather lonely".

§ 5

It was not in fact until more than a year after his son had been born—he had passed his final by then and been admitted, not without head-shaking from George, to a very junior partnership—that John perceived any change in his young wife.

And even then the change was so slight, so gradual, that it almost escaped him. Only when at his most imaginative or his most sensitive—and normally he was neither imaginative nor sensitive—would he dare to ask himself, "Is Nan quite as fond of me as she used to be?"

Their first dispute, accordingly, took him entirely by surprise.

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

§ 1

JOHN'S first dispute with Nan lasted less than twenty-four hours. It began ridiculously, on their return from a theatre, with his saying, "There's a jolly sound idea behind that play. Come to think of it, nine-tenths of humanity aren't much better than robots"; and Nan taking no notice of his remark.

"Don't you think I'm right?" he persisted.

"Oh, I suppose so."

"Didn't you enjoy yourself?"

"Enjoy myself!" Nan laughed. "You ought to know by this time that what I like when I go to a theatre—and goodness knows we don't go very often—is music and dancing."

John's lower jaw dropped.

"Sorry", he said.

"And why couldn't we have gone on somewhere afterwards? I hate coming straight home after a show."

"Too expensive."

"It doesn't cost as much as all that. I don't see why we should always have to do the stinting."

Biting her lips, Nan said no more. But she slept alone that night; and when John began, over next morning's breakfast, "Look here, about going on to supper and that sort of thing, it'll be all right in another year or two but we simply must be a bit careful till I'm making more money", she could not help snapping at him:

"There'd be plenty of money if it weren't for the Manor".

And that—said his sense of justice—was perfectly true.

Still, the Manor—he protested—had to be kept up, if only for "Johnny's" sake. The fact that his mother lived there didn't make it any more expensive for them. On the contrary.

She was always dipping into her own pocket for something or other.

"Why not?" said Nan. "She gets all the fun out of it." And that morning, for the first time, she did not offer to kiss him goodbye.

"He's beginning to get on my nerves", she thought, watching him away from the house. "He's so infernally serious. Why can't I have some fun? There's nobody to take me about now Maurice is in Paris."

The afternoon post brought a letter from Maurice. Reading between the lines, she gathered that he was having a love affair. The postscript confided, "I suppose you haven't got a bit of money you don't know what to do with. Twenty-five would come in pretty useful till the end of the quarter. Anyway here's a p.d. for it. I shall be getting some dividends in soon".

She locked away the postdated cheque in her jewelbox; scribbled one of her own, and put it in an envelope.

"Any news, darling?" asked John when he came home, a little earlier than usual, in the evening.

"Only what's in the paper. Did you have a good day at the office?"

"Not too bad. We won that case I was telling you about. Five hundred damages, too."

"How splendid."

She took him back to her bedroom that night. Neither of them referred to the dispute. It seemed altogether too trivial. A week later, however, the subject of the Manor cropped up again; and Nan said:

"If we were living there, it would be different. Couldn't we let the place?"

"But what about mother's hunting?"

"Always your mother", she thought; but kept her own counsel. For an open quarrel was the last thing she desired.

Actually, indeed—and this she was admitting to herself by the time her baby's second birthday came round—Nan Carteret did not know what she desired. The only concrete wish she could formulate summed itself up in the one word "Alteration".

If only something would alter. If only the wheels of her life could be jerked out of this rut into which they had sunk. She was so sick of keeping John's house, of ordering John's meals, of going out with John, and coming home with John, and going to bed with John, and kissing him goodbye before he went to the office, and kissing him good evening when he came back from the office.

If only she could hate John, or be unfaithful to John, or have one really good blazing row with him *and* his mother.

His blasted mother. Always so affable. Always so kind.

§ 2

That was the main trouble—decided Nan, one May afternoon in nineteen twenty-four, as she wheeled her baby's perambulator up and down the gravel outside her house. John and his mother were both so infernally, so inhumanly, kind, that one couldn't quarrel with them. Happy enough themselves, they took her happiness for granted.

Not that she couldn't give them a nice jolt whenever she made up her mind to. They didn't know that Maurice owed her the best part of two hundred pounds.

"Harry"—in her own mind, she always called the baby by that name—began to cry. Stooping, fondling the tiny wrinkled forehead, the tiny restless hands, her mood softened. This happiness, she had. She should be grateful for it. She was grateful. Otherwise . . .

"Otherwise", she decided, "I'd have let them find out about Maurice and that bookie. It wouldn't half have busted them. The holy name of Carteret, posted at Tattersall's. I suppose they do actually post them."

For Maurice's explanation—she remembered—had been gloriously vague: "I've got to have it by Monday. There'll be the very devil to pay if I don't. Help me just this once more, there's a darling. I simply daren't go back to Paris with this hanging over me".

That night, with John at one of his Masonic dinners, they had dined and danced together. Such fun, because one hardly ever went dancing nowadays.

Such fun. More fun—if only Maurice weren't John's brother . . .

But there Nan's imagination brought her up with a brisk pull.

Harry had stopped crying. The sun was coming out. She wheeled the perambulator into the shade of a tree—and began to reproach herself, furiously, for that nasty quirk in her thoughts.

"Even if Maurice weren't John's brother", thought continued, "I wouldn't let him make love to me. That isn't what I want. Then what do I want? Just to let myself go sometimes, to say what I'm really feeling."

Surprised, she knew that her eyes were suffusing. Having dabbed at them with a flimsy handkerchief, she looked up to see a taxicab just braking at the door of her own house.

"Well—of all the queer people to call", she thought.

For there was no mistaking that Victorian figure; and in a minute or so—the maid at the door leading her across the gravel—Nan found herself shaking the bony hand of Gertrude Henderson, who said, "As I happened to be passing through London, I thought it my duty to make the acquaintance of my great-grandson", and subsequently accepted a cup of tea.

§ 3

Advancing years might have increased Gertrude Henderson's prejudices. But they had also heightened her sensitivity.

"This girl isn't happy", she thought, watching Nan light a cigarette from the silver box on the tea tray. "She's like Charlotte used to be in the first years of her marriage. Perhaps she married for the same reason—to get away from home."

It had taken her such a long time to convince herself of the prime motive behind her own daughter's marriage (for which she might have blamed herself more had the marriage turned out less successful) that both the thought and the comparison stuck.

Intermittently throughout that summer term—sometimes at the most inconvenient moments—her recollection would conjure up the hour she had spent in Royal Avenue, and Nan's

face, a mask under the modern make-up to which she could never accustom herself, and Nan's voice, so artificially gay.

Almost everything about Nan—it seemed to Gertrude Henderson's heightened sensitivity—was artificial. Yet one could not feel hostile towards her, because one was too old for hostility towards individuals (however much one might resent their massed activities) and because somehow or other the whole impression the girl had made was so tragic.

"Tragic? How ridiculous", Gertrude tried to scoff. "She's like so many others. They've lost their code, they've given up their religion, they've no standards left. Accordingly, they can't be happy."

The generality, however, would not fit Nan; and once, at morning chapel, she actually caught herself putting up a special prayer for the girl, and for John, always her favourite grandson, though Maurice—she reluctantly admitted—possessed more "social gifts".

Neither grandson, to her great disappointment, could come down for "Old Hendersonians' Day". Maurice wrote four pages—from Barbizon—to explain why. John's letter was a single sheet of typewriting—much easier to read but, in her opinion, an infringement of etiquette, only condoned by the handwritten postscript, "We've decided to spend our summer holiday at the Manor so I'll look forward to seeing you there".

§ 4

Gertrude, too, found herself looking forward to that meeting. It might relieve her anxiety. She might even confide some of her feelings about Nan to Charlotte.

But almost from the moment she entered the Long Gallery, where John, Nan, Charlotte and Laura had just risen from the bridge table, Gertrude Henderson decided to "let sleeping dogs lie".

Outwardly—and the longer she stayed, the stronger grew the impression—no mother, no son and no daughter-in-law could have been more normal in their behaviours. John, who had learned to drive his mother's car, went fishing most days. Nan accompanied Charlotte into the village or to Laxford. The

child and its Norland nurse spent long hours in the woods or by the lake.

Occasionally Nan would go out to a tennis party, from which John usually fetched her. One night they dined—leaving their elders at home—with the Willoughbys. On another night, the Willoughbys dined at the Manor.

The most stereotyped of English summer holidays, thought Gertrude. Almost too stereotyped. Artificial again. More like scenes out of a mediocre book set in the “country house atmosphere” than scenes out of real life.

Or was she, the headmistress of Hendersons, growing over-imaginative as well as over-sensitive? It certainly seemed so until that evening, almost the last of her stay, when Charlotte made the trivial suggestion, “I think nurse is almost too careful about keeping Johnny in the shade, he really ought to be in the sun a little more”, and she happened to perceive the way the fingers of Nan’s right hand clenched, the look in her eyes.

The girl gave no other hint of her feelings. Her voice sounded quite smooth and entirely dutiful. “I’m afraid that’s my fault, granny”, was all she said. “I told her to keep him in the woods this afternoon.”

But the feelings, the tension, the successful effort to avoid even the semblance of a disagreement, were so obvious that Mrs. Henderson wondered how her grandson and her daughter—especially her daughter—could miss them. This, too, being obvious, from John’s, “The way you both fuss over that kid is ludicrous”, and Charlotte’s, “Well, I should let her take him by the lake tomorrow afternoon if I were you, dear”.

For although John and Nan’s second dispute—about spending their summer holiday at the Manor—had lasted for the best part of three days, it did not—thanks to Nan’s grip on herself—actually reach quarrelling point. While—thanks to that slyness which was intrinsic to her daughter-in-law’s character—Charlotte’s fondness for her had scarcely changed since that evening, the best part of three years back, when she had felt as though her entire armour were dropping off.

Resolute, then, that she had allowed an unreasonable antipathy to override judgment, she stuck to her decision, continuing to give Nan full marks for intelligence, for making

John happy, and above all for having presented her with a grandson.

Though how much her nascent love for "Johnny" influenced both her judgment and her behaviour towards the child's mother, Charlotte did not yet know.

The eyes of her intellect were out of focus ; had not seen clearly since that afternoon when she bent over the new-born baby's cradle. Momentarily she lived by the reflected radiance of her imagination rather than by the sharp light of her judgment.

Her imagination told her that she had every right to be content. Philip and Elizabeth, though she wished they could visit England more often, were happy in America. Maurice was happy—and apparently keeping out of trouble, though he occasionally wrote for money—in Paris. John was happy, with his work, with his wife, with his infant son.

"So why", commanded imagination, "shouldn't you be more than content ? Why shouldn't you be every bit as happy as they ?"

Obediently, therefore, she told herself, shortly after her forty-seventh birthday, that the dangerous years—and, for her, after all they had not been so very dangerous—were over.

From now onwards, she felt, her life would be an equable affair ; busy enough without being too busy ; horses and hounds its main excitement ; the usual round of country duties its main occupation ; her children, her daughter-in-law, and of course her grandson, its enduring interest.

§ 5

Two days before that Christmas, Nan wrote :

"Dear Granny, Such a shame but I'm afraid we shan't be able to come after all. I've just had to take to my bed with this filthy influenza. Nothing very serious. But the doctor doesn't think I'll be up to travelling for the best part of a week. John and Johnny both send love and all the very best wishes for nineteen twenty-five, in which of course I join them".

Two days after that New Year, Horatio Willoughby, dismounting at change of horses, puffed :

"If you want a dead bargain, Lady C., give me a couple of ponies for this one. He's up to my weight—and that's any weight. He's as sound as a bell. He jumps like a stag. But it's all I can do to compete with him, and as for letting Gladys get on his back, I'd as soon let her fly her own aeroplane".

Charlotte said, "Make it forty, and I'll take him off your hands".

Willoughby said, "All right as it's you".

Rapscallion turned out to be just the horse Charlotte needed. Black with a white blaze between his eager eyes, he stood nearly seventeen hands. The longest run could not tire, the highest fence could not daunt him. But, for water, he displayed the most peculiar aversion. A two-foot brook—and only the spur would get him across.

"Still", as Charlotte confided to Laura one night just before the end of the season, "we all have our faults, and horses are rather like human beings. The more one knows their good qualities, the less notice one takes of their bad ones."

Which might have been an enlightening parallel—had she realised the truth of the situation developing between Nan and John.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

§ 1

JOHN CARTERET, setting out from Chelsea on that bright May morning in nineteen twenty-five, was almost as blind to the domestic situation as his mother. Nan had her faults, of course. A bit of a temper. And last night, admittedly, she had let her temper get out of hand.

He ran over the situation in his mind—and blamed himself, as usual after one of their “disagreements”, for his own stubbornness. He had been rather obstinate. Late nights always tired him. And of course he couldn’t dance.

Still, she needn’t have thrown that disability in his face.

Climbing on to his customary bus, he remembered the look she had darted at him, the actual words, “Just because you don’t happen to be amused, is there any reason why I should be dragged home to bed? What am I supposed to be, an invalid’s companion?”

In front of other people, too. Grinners. Half-tight.

Nan seemed to have developed a liking for the kind of party where people got half-tight. They cheered her up, she said. Dash it, why should she need cheering up? Hadn’t she got everything a woman wanted—a nice home, a husband who really loved her, a child just beginning to walk and talk, a bigger housekeeping allowance?

Didn’t she give plenty of parties—one dinner a week and women in for bridge most afternoons—herself?

“But of course”, said John’s sense of fairness, “it’s a bit lonely for her—my being at the office all day and never getting home much before seven.”

All the same, she might have come down to breakfast; she could have been a little more gracious when he had gone out of his way to apologise (dash it all, she should have been the

first to apologise), "I'm sorry about last night. I didn't realise you were enjoying yourself so much or I wouldn't have suggested our leaving".

She might have said something more than just, "Oh, that's all right. I'm used to it".

And that other look she had darted at him from the bed.

The bus decanted him within a hundred yards of the Georgian house behind Smith Square. He stood for a moment listening to the noise of drills and hammers, pleased—as always—to know that slums were being cleared. A pity that Nan didn't share his interest in politics, in good government. With a different kind of wife—now that he didn't stammer any more—he might have taken up some kind of public work. Stood for the L.C.C., perhaps?

The thought, however, struck him as faintly disloyal—and anyway he had plenty of work looking after his clients. There'd be a lot more, too, if George's health didn't improve.

Not a very good life, George's. Funny, when his father and Herbert had always been so fit.

§ 2

John stumped in to the office and up the uncarpeted stairs to his own room. It was exactly nine-fifteen. His young male secretary had already opened all his letters except one, marked "Private".

"Maurice", thought John—and a trifle grimly, "I can guess the contents."

He opened the letter and read it through. The tone, the moderation of the demand, were pleasant surprises. But the postscript, "I've decided to come home and try my luck in London. That's really why I want the money. To settle up, don't you know", wrinkled John's forehead and sent his hand feeling for his pipe.

Did he really want Maurice in London? Wasn't Maurice one of those people one preferred to make happy at a distance?

But that thought, also, seemed disloyal. And in another moment or so he was on his feet, fumbling for his key chain,

opening his private safe, taking out the big red book in which he kept his meticulous accounts.

Back at the desk, he turned to the page headed, "Maurice Carteret—Income Account"; and wondered, not for the first time, why Maurice should have agreed to their mother's, "Let John look after your capital till you're a bit older, dear", and why he himself had agreed to assume the responsibility for Maurice's investments.

Still, he had done so. And because it meant "a bit of a palaver" to arrange a special overdraft for Maurice, he had always advanced him any money he needed out of his own balance.

Three hundred altogether. Plus this other fifty. Oh well, the youngster might have been more extravagant. As he himself wrote, "It isn't as if I owed anybody else anything. After all, it's really my own money. I'm entitled to spend a bit of my capital on educating myself".

Perhaps, too, it was just as well Maurice had decided to come home and live in London. Nan liked him so much. They would be good company for each other. Maurice would "cheer her up" if anybody could.

Meanwhile—with George still away from the office—he really must get on with, "Morgan-Little v. Morgan-Little—Chesterfield intervening".

"Just as well George is away", he thought. For George had a particular aversion to a certain type of divorce case.

Herbert's attitude—John had recently discovered—was the exact opposite. He pumped in and discussed this one at unsavoury length before he breezed out again on his way to the law courts.

"Where'd the surgeons be if they hadn't any appendices to remove", he laughed. "Where'd we lawyers be if we hadn't any marriages to dissolve. I don't think that evidence from Paris is good enough. Judges want names nowadays. It ought to be easy enough to find out who the fellow was. If I were you, I'd tell Morgan-Little so. Tell him we want to put another detective agency on. After all, his wife and that fellow spent the best part of a week together. It oughtn't to take very much trouble to ferret out who he was."

§ 3

Captain the Honourable Morgan-Little had made an appointment with John for five o'clock.

"Sounds a bit expensive", said he. "And not particularly sporting. But you and that uncle of yours know more about this sort of game than I do. So go right ahead."

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

§ 1

EVER since their last summer holiday at the Manor—thought Nan, still waiting for her husband's return towards seven o'clock of that same evening—things had been going wrong.

"And the worst of it is", thought continued, "that there's no real reason why they should. Take last night now. Take this morning. Who behaved badly? He or you?"

Her heart troubled her as she answered these questions; and for the next ten minutes conscience rode her with whip and spurs. She was a beast—and an ungrateful beast. She had married John with her eyes wide open—knowing him in love with her, realising every single one of her responsibilities towards him.

And John was still in love with her. Only—how long would the love last?

"Not very long", decided Nan, "if I don't pull myself together. And once he falls out of love with me, I'm spun."

It seemed strange that John's affection should be of so much importance. She tried to argue with herself that her decision was rather ridiculous. "As I've never been in love with him", she tried to tell herself, "it couldn't really matter."

Yet secretly she knew that it would matter—and why it would matter—because of the link between them—because of "Harry", their child.

Yet not only because of the child. There was another, a stronger, a more mysterious link between her and her husband—this very conscience she had so often sought to deny.

John—no getting away from one's knowledge of his character—was so essentially *good*. Hurting him, one hurt all that was best in one's own nature.

That thought, however—like the whole attack of conscience which had produced it—proved a little beyond Nan.

"I'm a bit crazy tonight", she told herself; and, starting up from the sofa on which she had been lying, she walked quickly to the fireplace; stood there, staring at herself in the mirror.

"Thirty next year", brooded Nan. "And don't you look it. You blasted idiot. What have you been crying about? You've got a baby, haven't you? You've got enough money, haven't you. You've got heaps of friends, haven't you?"

But she was to cry again that night, silently, dabbing away the tears with a furtive hand while she listened to John's breathing from the other bed.

Why couldn't John sleep more quietly? Why must she go on pretending—for how long must she go on pretending—that she liked having him to sleep with her?

And that other pretence, "Silly boy—of course I love you—otherwise I shouldn't have married you", with the clumsy hands, the clumsy mouth so eager . . .

Eager! Because he didn't know, because she'd never let him guess, her own revulsions.

Ever since Harry had been born, she had experienced these revulsions. She couldn't bear them much longer.

She couldn't. She couldn't.

If only he didn't demand . . .

But John never demanded. He was so good. So terribly, so cruelly good. That was what hurt. That was why one would feel such a swine if one didn't go on pretending.

Damn it, one must go on pretending. Nothing else to be done.

Nothing.

Ever.

So Nan fell asleep to the sound of John's breathing, almost as another woman—though she, being of sterner stuff, never cried—had so often fallen asleep to the sound of his father's.

But that parallel also, Charlotte, who came up for a wedding next day and dined with them in the evening, failed to draw.

§ 2

Over the dinner table that evening John said, "By the way, mother, I've had a letter from Maurice"; and Charlotte, "So have I. Isn't it nice he's coming back to England?"

But although John agreed, "Yes. Rather", Nan knew, had known for twenty-four hours now, that he would rather Maurice stayed abroad.

John had not, of course, told her that outright. He was always reticent about his exact feelings towards his youngest brother, unlike Maurice—who had never made any bones about his feelings towards John.

"I realise all his good qualities", she remembered Maurice confiding on his last visit, "but I'm blown if I can live up to 'em. It always defeats me that you should have fallen for him."

Such cheek! But then Maurice was of the new generation. He had no reticences. Pity she had so many.

"I'm between the two", thought Nan. "Not quite pre-war and not quite post-war." And, looking at Charlotte, very much *en beauté* with her recently shingled hair and her grand figure, she felt suddenly envious.

Her mother-in-law—she decided—could never have had a love trouble in her life.

Dinner over, they left John to his port.

"Can I go up to the nursery?" asked Charlotte.

"If you must", thought Nan; but her, "Of course, granny", was spoken with a smile.

The child slept—a look of contentment on his round face, his teddy bear beside him. When they had tiptoed out of the night nursery, Charlotte said, "He grows more like his father every day. By the way, has John put him down for Harrow yet?"

"Yes." Off her guard, Nan did not hesitate. "Unfortunately."

"Why unfortunately?"

"Because I'd rather it had been Eton. Father was there, you see."

"But, my dear, the Carterets have always gone to Harrow."

The tone stifled discussion. Silent, they made their way down to the drawing room.

"Would you like another cigarette, granny?"

"Thank you, my dear."

Nan's envy had disappeared. Flicking on the lighter, watching Charlotte take that first puff, all the antipathy of all the years seemed as though it must flare up into some explosion.

"The last time a Carteret was at Harrow", she wanted to say, "he didn't exactly cover the sacred name with glory."

But what would be the use of saying things like that? Rows couldn't do any good. Nothing could do any good.

"You've made your bed", she thought, "and you've got to keep lying in it. For ever and ever. Amen."

Meanwhile she realised that she was listening, her lips half-parted, to more talk about her baby :

"We won't send him to Hendersons till he's nine. I'm not sure that I approve of day schools. Do you think Laura would be of any use to you later on?"

Laura. That old stick!

John came in before she had time to protest. Charlotte repeated herself. John said, "By jove, that's quite a scheme. I don't approve of day schools either".

Juggernauts, both of them, rolling her flat, subduing her personality to their own level. Harrow and Cambridge—when she wanted Eton and Oxford.

"He's my boy", cried a mad possessiveness in her. "Not theirs. They shan't take him from me. Either of them."

Then the talk turned on Maurice again, and she could not help thinking what fools they both were, making plans for him too, where he was to live, whether he would need a little more money, "Till he gets on his feet, mother. He's going to take up commercial art, he says, posters and that sort of thing".

A little more money. How they would jump if they knew what he owed her. Not that she grudged it. Maurice at any rate was human. One could laugh, one could let oneself go with him. He didn't wrinkle his nostrils if one happened to say "bloody". And he was so handsome. He didn't look like a Carteret at all. If he'd been any other woman's son but granny's, one might have imagined . . .

Gosh, what an idea!

Somehow or other, though, the idea made Nan chuckle to herself. Maliciously, her imagination began to play with it. Plenty of these Victorian women—if one could believe a book of memoirs one had happened to pick up the other day—had been pretty hot stuff. Supposing granny . . .

Now who did Maurice look like? He reminded one of somebody. A man in a red coat? A man in a black coat with a gardenia at his buttonhole? A man whom John had confessed he didn't like. Rupert. Rupert Whittinghame. Granny's cousin. The man she had been going to marry . . .

How perfectly ridiculous.

Supposing though—just for the sheer malicious fun of the thing—that it were true?

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

§ 1

It was fun—Nan discovered—to let her imagination play with the idea of some long-ago love affair between the woman who was her mother-in-law and the man of whom Harry had once said, "They didn't actually hack him out of the regiment. So I suppose one oughtn't to bring it up. Still, he had to send in his papers. He was in a pretty sticky divorce case as far as I remember. Or it may have been that he got into a spot of trouble with his bookies".

The more one played with the idea, however, the more fantastic it seemed.

Besides, she liked Maurice. It would be grand to have him back again. He always had such a lot to say for himself. He was such marvellous company, such a perfect dancer.

Not that she could ever confide in him. Only fool women confided. Unless they took a lover. But she didn't want a lover. It was the lover, more than the husband, in John which set her teeth on edge. If only John could go on being fond of her without . . . that.

"I believe I am going crazy", Nan told herself, some days later, as she set out, wheeling the perambulator because it was nurse's afternoon off, for Chelsea Embankment. "I don't want John to leave off loving me. And yet I hate giving him the thing which makes him go on loving me. If only he and I could just be friends. If only I had one real friend, someone I could let myself go with."

Exactly at that moment she heard Maurice's hail.

"Just on my way to pay my respects and all that sort of thing", he said, whipping off a hat that struck her as a little too arty. "I only got in late last night."

Still holding her hand, he peered into the perambulator,

and continued, "The future head of the house is looking pretty bonny. How about letting me paint him? Can I wake him up and see what he really looks like?"

"He'll wake up quite soon enough", said Nan. "And I'm sure you're no good at painting children."

"Well, it wouldn't cost you anything to find out. I used to pay quite a lot of my debts in Paris with pictures."

Grinning, he released her fingers.

"There's a bit of a wind", he continued. "Nursemaid oughtn't to stand about in it. Let's be mushing on."

He fell into step beside her. She noticed that his shirt and tie were as arty as his hat; and chaffed him about them.

"I believe in dressing the part", he said. "And don't forget we're in Chelsea. My native village, so to speak. How's my respected brother? Fairly coining the spondulicks, I hope. You're looking pretty adequate. Nice colour, that dress. Skirts still just as short here as they are on the Rive Gauche, I observe. The hat's not too bad, either. Hallo, John Carteret the umpteenth has decided to wake up."

They were on the embankment by then. Nan stopped the perambulator. Its occupant lisped, "Can I go walkies, mummy?" ; and, staring at the red tie :

"Who's he?"

"Your Uncle Maurice, darling."

"Is he a nice nuncle?"

"Sometimes."

"Don't you believe her. I'm always nice."

They walked on again—the baby talkative, Maurice and Nan vaguely uncomfortable. Soon they were across Albert Bridge and into Battersea Park.

"Do we let him off his lead here?" asked Maurice.

"Just for a few minutes. I don't like him to walk too much."

"Makes 'em bandy, doesn't it?"

Nan laughed as she lifted her baby in her arms. Maurice thought what a picture she made.

"If only her eyes were a shade larger", he thought, "Nan would be absolutely ravishing."

Aloud he said, "This is a topping place, isn't it? But I

should have thought Hyde Park was more your line of country”.

“It’s so far.” Nan put the child down. “And one runs into such a lot of people one knows.”

“But don’t you like people?”

She knew she ought not to say, “At the moment, I’m loathing everybody”.

But the words escaped her before she could check them; and Maurice’s dark eyes appraised her for just a little longer than seemed right before he asked, “Does that include my egregious brother?”

“Of course not”, she retorted. “I’m just a little fed up. That’s all.”

“One does get that way sometimes.”

There was a ball in the perambulator. He picked it up, tossed it, crying, “Catch, Johnny”.

The three of them played together for a quarter of an hour. She asked Maurice home to tea. He insisted, however, “Why? There’s quite a decent place here. Let me buy you some”.

Chestnuts were almost out. Some lilac had bloomed. Tulips made a brave show in the borders. The waitress, when she brought their bill, asked Maurice, “How old is your little boy, sir?”

Johnny, indignant, lisped, “He’s not my daddy. He’s only my nuncle”.

“I happen to be a perfectly good bachelor”, said Maurice. “So there’s still a chance for you, young woman.”

The waitress blushed. When she had left them, Nan frowned, “You really oughtn’t to have said that. You made the poor girl feel quite uncomfortable. You’re not in Montmartre any more, you know”.

Maurice stroked his flaxen moustache.

“Hardly Carteret”, he admitted. “But I never could live up to ’em. Don’t you find it a bit difficult sometimes?”

Nan burked the question. Johnny broke in to beg for another cake.

“Certainly not”, she said.

“But I wants another cake.”

“There speaks the Whittinghame”, remarked Maurice.

Nan's heart seemed to turn over inside her. She felt her face blanching under the make-up, her lips going dry.

"Jolly fine lot the Whittinghames", went on Maurice, speaking quite casually. "You know old Gertrude. Well, her mother—grand old skate she must have been too—was one of them. That may have been one of the reasons John didn't approve of mother marrying Rupert. You remember him, of course."

"Yes."

"I often wish he hadn't been killed. Of course I was only a kid at the time—but when it happened I blubbed like anything. I", his voice broke a tone, "just loved that fellow. He was so human, and such a sportsman. I bet he'd have made mother happy, too. And if one had got into a mess . . ."

He hesitated; stopped.

"Are you?" asked Nan.

"Not for money, if that's what you mean. It may blow over all right. If it doesn't——"

He changed the subject; and refused—despite urging—further confidences.

"I'm afraid I can't see you home", he said, looking at his watch as she tucked the child back into its perambulator. "I've got an appointment up west at half-past five and it's pretty well that already."

"Lady?" asked Nan.

But again he refused to confide, whipping off his hat and setting off at the double for the gates.

"How extravagant he always is", thought Nan as she watched him jump into a taxi that happened to be passing. "But how he always makes me laugh."

§ 2

It was well after six before Nan returned to Royal Avenue; but when John entered the night nursery his son had already fallen asleep.

"Hush", Nan whispered. "I've only just got him off. And do go and dress yourself. You know the Allisons are coming in for dinner and bridge."

Not until Major and Mrs. Allison had left after an interminable last rubber, did she tell John about her meeting with Maurice.

"The young devil might have let me know he was home", grumbled John. "Has he written to mother?"

"I don't know. He didn't say. I expect so."

He kissed her and went up to his own room. She stayed to pat cushions, to dust her new velvet bridge table, to put her cards away and empty the ashtrays.

The mystery of Maurice's unlikeness to the rest of the family seemed as though it were solved. It was perfectly natural that he should look like a Whittinghame. Her conscience reproached her—not too severely, because they had been such fun—for having harboured unjust suspicions.

She felt a little happier that night. Nevertheless it took her longer than usual to get to sleep. A queer sensation of guilt harried her—and a curious excitement—and a peculiar worry.

Had Maurice really landed himself in a mess? If he had, how furious, how unforgiving, John would be.

John didn't understand Maurice. Even his own mother didn't.

She did, though. She always had—from that afternoon when she'd taken him out dancing and made him just a bit squiffy.

Maurice was the type of boy whom any girl could get round if only she made up her mind. He had no money sense either.

A bit of a rotter really. So why did one like him so much, why would one be so ready to help him, even to champion him, if he really had landed himself in a mess?

"But I expect it's all right", thought Nan, just before she fell asleep. "He always exaggerates."

§ 3

Maurice telephoned Nan next day. She took down his address and his telephone number. She asked if he had written to his mother. He answered:

"Rather. I'm running down to the Manor for the week end".

John, grumbling, "He might have let the office know", entered that address and the phone number in the thin blue diary he always carried.

And at exactly five minutes past ten on the Wednesday morning the friend in whose studio Maurice was staying thumped on his door, shook him by the shoulder, saying: "Wake up, you sluggard. There's a telegram for you".

"Well, open the thing."

The telegram read, "Must see you come office immediately John".

"Holy Moses", thought Maurice. "Edna was right after all. Somebody has been yapping."

He took longer than usual over his dressing. The less arty he looked for this interview the better. And he ought to put something solid under his waistcoat first.

His friend's daily woman cooked him a plate of eggs and bacon. He took a pair of gloves, a stick, and a bowler hat, which he adjusted with some care before the mirror.

"Got to lie like the devil", he decided as he stepped into a taxi. "Only thing for a gentleman in my circumstances to do."

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

§ 1

FOR the fifth time that morning, John looked at his father's heavy gold watch.

"Maurice may not be in London", he thought. "He may not have got my telegram."

Then the telephone rang again; and yet another client—curse his clients—what did he care, today, about their trumpety litigations?—was ushered in.

That litigant, having finished his affairs, stayed to gossip. What did Sir John think about this new Food Council? Just the usual eyewash. The fact of the matter was that our politicians never *did* anything. Look at Mussolini. Now there was a man. People said he wouldn't last; that he would be assassinated. But they'd been saying that for the best part of three years, and the fellow was still going as strong as ever.

And why the blazes didn't the French get out of the Ruhr?

"Why don't you get out?" John kept thinking. But of course one couldn't kick the man out, one just had to go on being polite to him—and keep one's mind off those papers . . .

At last, gossip came to an end and John could rise from his desk. But hardly had he shaken hands, than the telephone called him once more. And after that came another and yet another client.

It was almost lunch time before his secretary stood before him to say, "Your brother's waiting downstairs. Shall I tell them to send him up to you?"

"Yes." To the listener, John's tone betrayed nothing of the unusual. "And please see that we are not disturbed."

§ 2

Maurice's face, when he entered John's office, wore its most ingratiating grin. He took off his hat, laid it with his gloves and stick on the leather-topped table by the door.

"I hope I've made it snappy enough for you", he began, and offered a hand across the desk.

John took the hand without rising.

"Sit down", he said. "I've got several questions to ask you ; and, before I put them, I must advise you to be very careful about your answers."

Their eyes clashed.

"This all sounds very legal", said Maurice, stroking his moustache. "Am I going to be arrested or something ?"

John said, "There are some things one doesn't joke about" ; and his left hand went to a drawer.

He took out a sheet of foolscap ; studied it for a moment, and laid it on the blotter.

"The first question I want you to answer", he continued, picking up a fountain pen, "is this. Do you know a lady called Edna Morgan-Little ?"

Maurice's right hand tightened on the chair arm.

"Supposing I do", he quibbled. "What of it ?"

John hesitated.

"We happen to be acting for her husband in a divorce case", he said at last.

"Really. How interesting."

"You're likely to find it more than just interesting before I've finished. I take it from your answer that you are acquainted with the lady."

"Not much use lying about that", Maurice said to himself, and aloud :

"The witness, under cross-examination, admitted that he did".

"You and Mrs. Morgan-Little"—John spoke very slowly, trying his best to curb the sudden temper aroused by Maurice's flippancy—"met in Paris. That must have been"—he referred to the paper—"shortly after Christmas."

Maurice laughed, though the nonchalance cost him an effort :

"You've made a boss shot there, old chap. I've known Ed . . . Mrs. Morgan-Little ever since I first went to Paris".

"That"—John spoke even more slowly—"was not what I suggested to you."

"You seem to be suggesting quite a lot one way and another. Go on."

But for a long while John refused to say any more. He just sat there, staring at the paper in front of him, two of his fingers gripped on the pen.

"Hopeless", John was thinking. "He doesn't understand. He doesn't realise how much I'd do to get him out of it, to keep *our* name out of it. He's always disliked me. He almost admitted it—that day Johnny was born." And his eyes went to the silver-framed photograph of Johnny, in Nan's arms, on his desk.

Maurice noticed that movement of his brother's brown eyes. He was feeling a little calmer now. John couldn't know very much. As long as one kept one's head, as long as one didn't allow oneself to be trapped into some admission that might damage Edna, one would be as right as rain.

John's next words, however, made Maurice's legs, crossed carelessly one over the other, want to shake.

"Since you ask me to go on"—the brown eyes were with the paper again—"I will. But before I do, I want to tell you this. I'm not acting, at the moment, as Captain Morgan-Little's solicitor. As his solicitor, I couldn't have asked you to come and see me. Possibly, you know why.

"Do you know why?" The directness of the question, John's sudden stare, sent a shiver down Maurice's backbone.

"I haven't got the slightest idea", he managed to stammer; and John's thoughts went to their mother, to Nan.

"Dishonour for them, too", thought John. "The same name. Dragged in the mud. Beastly." And all the innate Puritan in him revolted from what he must now say.

His temper seemed to have cooled. It was disgust he felt, rather than rage. But no pity touched him as he continued:

"Then I'd better tell you. According to some evidence in our possession—it only came into our possession last night, even Uncle Herbert hasn't seen it yet—you and the lady I've

mentioned left Paris in a hired motor car, of which we have the number, at three o'clock in the afternoon of January the twelfth this year, and did not return to Paris until dinner time on the eighteenth. During that period, you stayed at two different wayside hotels, in each of which you occupied a suite consisting of a double bedroom, a sitting room and a bathroom. In both cases, you took the precaution of using a false name. But in one of those hotels either you or she were careless enough to leave a snapshot of yourselves".

And there John hesitated for a last second before continuing, "Mrs. Morgan-Little's maid, who has since left her, had no difficulty in identifying the man in that snapshot. Neither had the hotel proprietor. Neither had your concierge in Paris. Neither, unfortunately, had I".

§ 3

His brother seemed to have finished. One of Maurice's sock-suspender buckles was cutting into his calf by then. His right hand seemed as though it were permanently stuck to the chair-arm. Curiously, nevertheless, he experienced a certain feeling of relief.

This thing had been hanging over one for so long—ever since Edna had sent for one to say, "That Gordon of mine is behaving like an absolute louse. I've offered to divorce him over and over again—and he wouldn't hear of it. Now what do you think he's done? Started a case against me, if you please. But you'll be all right, darling. He only wants to get rid of me. He's not out for damages. He doesn't even know your name anyway. My solicitors say that's obvious from the way the petition's drawn up. And, I say, who do you think Gordon's gone to? Carteret and Carteret. Isn't it a scream?"

Recollections ceased. The present came back with a rush. All lawyers were tricky. John might just be bluffing. Not likely, of course. The head of the house was too much of a stickler for that. Still, one might as well make certain.

"Can one see the photograph?" asked Maurice casually.

"No." John's monosyllable stifled discussion. "So my word's not good enough for you", it seemed to be saying.

Maurice's eyes went to the big rack of deed boxes. He found himself reading the names on them: "Sir John Carteret, Bart.", "Lady (Charlotte) Carteret", "Maurice Carteret, Esq.", but aimlessly, his mind almost a complete blank.

John had risen. He was pacing up and down the room, his hands in his trouser pockets, his blunt forehead wrinkled. One observed, for all the disturbance in one's mind, that the paces were not quite even, that the false leg dragged a little.

"Good eye, mine", thought Maurice. "Doesn't miss much."

Then he, too, rose; because his height always seemed to give him an advantage; and John ceased his pacing; and they faced each other; and John said, "One thing that defeats me is how you could have fallen in love with a woman who's so much older than you are".

"Me in love with Edna." Sheer surprise drove Maurice from his last defences. "What on earth makes you think that? You'll be telling me it's my duty to marry her next."

"Isn't it—if her husband names you as co-respondent?"

That time sheer surprise held Maurice dumb.

"Even if I were in love with her", he said at last, "I'd rather be dead than marry her."

"Then why did you——"

"Why shouldn't I? We both wanted a bit of fun."

Fun! The word—it seemed to John—was pregnant with the whole difference between their characters. Fun! That was all Maurice lived for. Everything was fun to Maurice—even sleeping with another man's wife.

His rage was on the return. Curbing it, he turned away; walked to the window, stood staring at the sunshine outside.

"Then you don't deny it." He had turned back. They were facing each other once more.

"What's the use?"

Maurice sat down, took out his silver case, tapped and lit a cigarette. He wasn't afraid of John. John could go to hell for all he cared. Making all this fuss, just because one happened to have had a bit of bad luck. And imagining one was going to marry Edna.

Edna! Why—the woman wasn't much better than a tart. John still stood. Maurice smoked on.

"What's the use?" he repeated. "I suppose you'll have to go through with it."

"I! Do you really imagine I'm going on with a case against my own brother?"

John sat down. In the silence that followed, his mind paltered with duty. Why not suppress this evidence against Maurice, furnish no further particulars? They ought to be able to get Morgan-Little his divorce without disclosing the co-respondent's identity. Nobody else in the office knew about the detective's report.

Silence continued while his imagination tempted him. There were times when a man had a twofold duty. Why should he drag his own name through the mud just to make Morgan-Little's case against his wife a cast-iron certainty?

Imagination worked on. He saw headlines. The cheaper newspapers would simply wallow. "Baronet's brother and army captain's wife. Alleged misconduct in French hotels. Today's evidence." That wouldn't do the firm much good either.

All the same . . .

"All the same", decided John, "I can't suppress this evidence, because it wouldn't be cricket."

The absurdity of the reason did not escape him. He could even sneer at himself for it. But the conclusion remained absolute. Nothing—he knew—could move him from it. He must send for Morgan-Little as soon as he was through with Maurice, give him the detective's report, tell him he would have to employ another solicitor.

Then Maurice broke the silence; and, once again, John's rage began to ebb.

"I hadn't thought of that", said Maurice. "Of course it would be damned awkward—for both of us—if you had to bring a case against me. Still, you're behaving jolly decently. And I really do appreciate it. John"—the old charm, the old fascination crept into his voice—"I'd give anything for this not to have happened. It's just bad luck really. Poor mother. She won't like it any more than you do."

John's lips tightened. He was still fully conscious of his disgust as he broke in:

"You might have thought of her. You might have thought of Nan".

"But, my dear chap—— You don't seem to understand. I didn't want this to happen. I'd no idea it could happen. After all, you can't expect a fellow of my age to live like a bally monk. Supposing you weren't married, supposing a pretty woman took a fancy to you. Dash it, one can't just tell 'em to go and chase themselves. At least I can't."

"You knew she was married, though."

"Yes." ("Better lay all one's cards on the table", thought Maurice.) "Yes. I knew that all right. But they weren't living together. They hadn't for years. He wasn't a pal of mine or anything. I'd never even met him."

John's eyes told him that he had scored a point. It seemed a good moment to break off.

"That's all I can say for myself", he went on, "except that I'm most awfully sorry. Oh, and one other thing. Let me break this to mother, will you? I think I'd better run down and see her again on Friday or Saturday. It's always easier seeing people than writing letters. By the way, how soon will the balloon go up? Not yet awhile, I hope."

"No." John spoke very slowly. "Not until the autumn anyway. Perhaps not till next year. There are a lot of defended cases in the list. About mother——"

"She'll take it better from me." Maurice spoke very quickly. "Do you realise what the time is? Nearly two. I suppose it's no good asking you to come and have a spot of lunch."

"I'm afraid"—John looked at the pad on his desk—"I've got someone coming to see me in a quarter of an hour."

"I say, you oughtn't to go without anything to eat. Can't you send out for some sandwiches or something?"

The grin was back on his youngest brother's face. But the grin—it seemed to John—held nothing of hostility.

A queer fellow, this youngest brother of his. Made one so angry. Made one so disgusted. No more morals than a tom cat. And yet, one couldn't positively dislike him. Not when one was actually with him anyway. It was more the idea of

him that one disliked, the idea that any man could be so utterly casual.

Look at him now. He didn't even bear one any malice. He only seemed sorry that one mightn't be going to have a sandwich.

And, "He'll save me at least one worry", thought John, as Maurice picked up his hat, stick and gloves from the leather-topped table by the door, "by telling mother all about it".

§ 4

For during these last months—John realised once Maurice had left him—he and his mother had not indulged in one really intimate conversation.

He fell to wondering why. Of course they didn't see very much of each other nowadays. He hadn't been able to run down to the Manor for Christmas because of Nan's influenza. They hadn't gone down for Easter either. Nan hadn't wanted to. And then—it was so difficult to be really intimate with one subject completely barred.

After all, he couldn't possibly tell his mother about his disputes with Nan. And they were always having disputes, they were so often at crosspurposes nowadays.

A pity—considering how much they were still in love with each other. A great pity. Somehow it took the edge off things. Somehow—even though one loved her as much as ever—one wasn't as happy as one used to be.

"Her fault or mine?" brooded John, munching his sandwiches and drinking his glass of water. "Fifty-fifty, I suppose. Or perhaps it's mostly mine. I have to work so hard. I get so jolly tired of an evening. This leg still gives me gyp sometimes. Perhaps it's that which makes me ratty every now and again. Not that I ever let on about it. At least I don't think I do."

His thoughts about Nan diffused. He began to wonder—just before his next client was ushered in—what she would have to say when he told her about Maurice.

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

§ 1

"NAN will be so upset when I tell her about Maurice," thought John Carteret, walking to his bus that night. "She's always been so fond of him."

And strolling with her in Hyde Park on the Sunday morning—somehow or other it had not seemed right that he should break the bad news to his wife before Maurice himself had broken it to his mother—he thought, "This beastly case is bound to make a difference to their friendship. She won't want him at any of her parties—at least not until things have blown over".

Accordingly it was with the greatest diffidence that he began, just after their solitary luncheon, "I've got something to tell you. I'm afraid it'll be rather a shock", only to be interrupted:

"Is it about Maurice and that divorce case he's mixed up in? Because if so, you needn't bother. We happened to meet in Battersea Park the other morning—let me see, when was it?—oh yes, Friday——"

"And he told you himself?" John's voice betrayed, to his watchful wife, not only surprise but annoyance.

"Yes." Nan's voice—though John only realised this afterwards—was studiously casual. "It's just bad luck, of course."

"*You* think that?"

"Well, what else can one think? He didn't mean any harm. He couldn't know her husband was having the lady watched, or that you were his solicitor. After all young men do have that kind of adventure."

"But—the scandal."

Still watchful, Nan changed her tactics.

"Scandals don't last long nowadays", she said, blowing

smoke through her thin nostrils. "People aren't as narrow-minded as they used to be, thank goodness. And anyway it's no good worrying about that. I'm certainly not going to let it make any difference."

She broke off. For the first time in their married life John asked himself, "Do I really know this woman? Is she my own wife, or some stranger?"

And all through the half-hour which followed those questions repeated themselves, consciously and subconsciously, in his mind.

This was a new Nan. One couldn't understand her. After all, she had intelligence. She had imagination. She must realise, as well as he himself, the immorality of this thing, the disgrace it would entail. Then why should she make so light of it, pretend it of no importance? She and Maurice had always been good enough friends. But there should be a limit to friendship.

"I'm afraid", he heard himself say, with Nan lighting yet another cigarette, "that mother won't have taken this as calmly as you seem to."

Unthinking, Nan snapped at him, "Possibly. She's almost as much of a prig as you are. But I don't see granny sending Maurice to Coventry as you've apparently been expecting me to".

After that silence stretched between them like a taut wire.

"I never said I expected you to send him to Coventry." John spoke at last.

"No. But you implied it."

"And as for my being a prig—we'll leave mother out of it if you don't mind—I fail to see anything priggish in asking people to respect the common decencies."

"Without making any allowances for human nature."

"Oh, for God's sake, shut up."

His sudden outburst surprised John even more than it surprised Nan. His legal training seemed to have deserted him; and all the domestic amenities as though they were going by the board. He knew that he had put himself in the wrong—but not that she had realised this before the words were out

of his mouth, that she was inordinately glad of it, ready to take every advantage he had placed in her hands.

"Ser-sorry", he stammered.

Nan only looked at him, her lips pursed, a curious new hardness in her eyes, before she rose, not without a certain dignity, and went from the room.

§ 2

John's impulse was to follow his wife. But he managed to restrain himself. Presently he heard the front door bang; and realised that his whole body was shaking as in the old days of his neurasthenia, before one of his bad spells.

He had stammered, too. So his shell-shock must be trying to come back. Only—he mustn't allow that. He must *not* allow that.

"Control", he thought. "Get a grip on yourself. Find something to do. Do it. Patch up this quarrel. You can't stand quarrels. It was your fault, too. You are a prig. You never can make any allowance for human nature."

It seemed as though someone were pouring iodine on the tight skin over the sawn bones just below his knee when he rose, when he stumped downstairs and seated himself at the desk in his tiny study to begin :

"Darling, I can't tell you how I hate myself for having said what I did. It was quite inexcusable. Do please forgive me . . ."

The letter finished, he left it in a tray on the little oak table in the narrow hall and took a taxi to his club. The bridge room there was empty. In the library only one sexagenarian member sat somnolent, his newspaper on his knees.

John took first one book, then another, from the forbidding shelves. Useless! He couldn't concentrate. His mind held to its single objective—Nan.

How could he have allowed himself to be so inexcusably rude to Nan? Would she ever forgive him? Would she ever telephone, as he had implored her to in his letter?

§ 3

It was nearly seven o'clock—and what he had done all that time, John could never quite remember—before the be-medalled waiter approached his saddlebag chair, and he went to that gloomy box in the marble hall, and heard Nan's voice say :

"Isn't it about time you came home ? . . . Your letter ? Yes, of course, I got it . . . What an ass you are, John. *I'm* not as sensitive as all that . . . We all lose our tempers sometimes".

Later that same evening she said to him :

"There are several people we really must have to dinner fairly soon, and I'm in my usual trouble about spare men. Maurice would come in very useful ; and after all we must have him here occasionally. He'll be hurt if we don't. Besides, rows never do a family any good".

John smiled before he said, "You may be right. I don't want to have a row with him. Have it your own way".

CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

§ 1

It was so much better, John felt, to let Nan have her own way, even though it went a little against the grain. And to this policy, from the night of what he always called to himself, "our worst quarrel" onwards, he held.

Yet constantly, from that night onwards, he was aware of his mind repeating, either consciously or subconsciously, those two questions: "Do you really know this woman? Is she your wife or some stranger?"

Too busy by day, too tired or too socially occupied ("The more people one knows", said Herbert, "the more business one's liable to get") of an evening, and altogether too simple in character for lengthy bouts of introspection, he realised nevertheless that his feelings towards Nan were undergoing some change.

The precise nature of this change eluded him. In one way he seemed as fond of her as ever. Fonder perhaps. Because otherwise he would not be giving way to her so often. But only in that one way. Physically! Mentally—it seemed to him—he was nearly always on the defensive, doubting, puzzling, afraid.

Sometimes his whole life, his whole happiness (for what was life without happiness?) seemed in jeopardy. At other times he would scourge himself for the mere disloyalty of such a thought.

§ 2

Meanwhile, to all outward seeming, John Carteret's life ran on its customary wheels, from the home to the office, from the office back to the home.

All that May, all that June and July, he grew busier and

busier. The giving-up of the Morgan-Little case was compensated for by a dozen others. Three important libel actions pended. A Trade Union official sought his advice, first in a private matter, later on Union business. After one of their talks, his mind flirted with politics again.

But if he took up politics, how would he find even an hour to be with his son?

Hitherto—it seemed to him throughout that summer—he had merely accepted his son. Now, every minute he spent with Johnny became increasingly precious. In their relationship, too, was a change, the precise nature of which also eluded him. Because his was not yet the type of mind which can analyse personal emotions.

Accordingly he did not understand that the principal delight experienced when alone with Johnny sprang from the fact that, against the baby intelligence, he had no need to be on guard.

For against every other intelligence—with July almost over, with Philip and Elizabeth nearly due for a visit, and Nan peculiarly acquiescent to his wish that they should all spend their holidays at the Manor—he knew, subconsciously at any rate, that he must stand on his guard. Everybody else made him fearful, set him doubting, puzzled him. Nor was his mother any exception to the rule.

Charlotte, in fact, puzzled him more than anybody. It seemed so incredible that her attitude towards Maurice should be almost identical with Nan's.

John sensed that from the very first letter she wrote, to the office, hoping that, "You won't be too hard on him. He's more temperamental than you are, and therefore more easily led astray". He sensed, too—when Charlotte came up to London, ostensibly to take advantage of "the sales"—that the less he said about his own feelings on the subject of Maurice's behaviour, which were intrinsically unaltered, the better.

But when she suggested, a little gingerly, that he might consider acting for Maurice ("He tells me they've served some papers on him, so I suppose he'll have to employ a solicitor") John shook his head, saying, "I'm afraid that's quite im-

possible". And his mother knew him well enough not to press the point home.

Neither of them, during that week, pressed any point home. They met every day, but always in the company of others—Nan, George, whose health grew more and more precarious, Herbert and Louisa, Maurice.

Since how could one object when Nan said, "We must have Maurice to dinner if granny's coming"? And how could one object when Charlotte said, "We must have Maurice at the Manor when Philip and Elizabeth are there"?

"Always we", John caught himself thinking. "Never I."

That thought distressed him more than any other. Because it seemed to imply a resentment towards, almost a hatred of family life. Deciding it disloyal, he suppressed it, as he imagined, finally. Unbeknown to him, nevertheless, his individuality continued its struggle for the essential freedom of maturity.

"Think for yourself", his individuality was trying to say. "Be yourself. See yourself."

§ 3

That, however, was the one thing John Carteret could not yet do. His whole education and all his affections bound him. Hendersons, Harrow, the Army, Cambridge, the Law—all these were fetters, riveted tighter by his physical love (it was only physical towards the end of that July) for Nan, the very different love he had for his mother, his growing affection for Johnny, and that respect for the very word "family" which (however much a man of his type may occasionally resent the cling of blood relationship) is the root instinct of his character.

Meanwhile a psychiatrist—if he could have succeeded in probing deep enough—might have discovered that John Carteret, at the age of thirty, was suffering from an obscure form of semi-arrested development.

Punctually every morning there arrived at the office in Westminster, a careful, efficient, commonsensible adult. But it was a man with the mind of a child—and, for saving grace, the heart of one—who came back to Royal Avenue every evening.

"He wouldn't know", Nan used to say to herself, "if I were to take a lover."

Thank goodness, though, she did not need a lover. All she had ever needed was companionship, someone—not a woman because they weren't safe—to whom she could open her heart a little.

Just a little.

Not too much, of course. She would never tell Maurice the truth about Harry Rackstraw. She would never tell him about her feelings for John.

But why should she ever tell John about those constant visits to Maurice' new studio?

John didn't like Maurice. He might disapprove. They might even have a row about it. And she didn't want any more rows. She was happy again.

"Perhaps just a shade too happy", Nan suspected while she did her holiday packing. Once she arrived at the Manor, however, no further suspicions harassed her mind.

CHAPTER SIXTY

§ 1

To a casual visitor, no family could have seemed more commonplace in their behaviour than the mother, the three sons, the son-in-law, the daughter, the daughter-in-law, and the grandchildren who filled the "ancestral" manor house (as Maurice would call it) that August.

Laura went on holiday; and, for the last ten days of the "American invasion" (to borrow another of Maurice's phrases), Gertrude Henderson occupied her room.

"Four times a great-grandmother", she said to Charlotte after her first visit to the old nursery, where Johnny and Elizabeth's three perky daughters had just finished their tea. "I ought to feel a hundred. But I don't. Not that I'm any great age. Only seventy come Michaelmas; and you're not even into your fifties yet."

"I shall be next year, mother."

"Well, you don't look it."

"I don't feel it either", decided Charlotte, as she dressed for dinner that evening. Once seated at table, nevertheless, the unaccustomed sight of all these faces together brought too many memories for any consciousness of youth to endure.

Dwight's face alone—though time had scarcely left a wrinkle on the tight skin round those intelligent eyes—marked, for her, the passage of fourteen years. It was all of that, and more, since she had heard the ropes shriek on the pulley blocks, since she had seen this very man struggling in the arms of this other . . .

But no. This other—seated at the opposite end of the table—was not husband to her, but son.

Thirty years, since she had first seen this eldest son, just a red wrinkled face on a white pillow; only a year less since

the nurse had stooped over her to say, "You'll be glad to hear it's a daughter this time".

And there sat that very daughter—whom one had taken to one's arms in the bare classroom at Miss Hornibrook's when she first confessed her love for Dwight.

It was good—thought Charlotte—to know Elizabeth still in love with Dwight. The girl looked so smart, so trim, so very nearly beautiful.

"I take a lot of trouble about my appearance", she had confided. "You'd be simply horrified to know how much I spend in beauty parlours, as we call them. But Dwight likes me always to be looking my best. He says it makes him happy."

Slightly Americanised, this Elizabeth. Philip, too—"Though I'll never take out my naturalisation papers, mother, however much money I make. England may be a bit behind the times—you are, you know—fancy paying people not to work—everybody in America thinks that's quite crazy—and you should hear what old man Theodore has to say about your trade unions—but I was born English and I'll die English".

To talk of dying when he wasn't even married yet. But then Philip and Elizabeth talked such a lot nowadays. Life in America had rubbed all the corners off them, rubbed all the shynesses out of them. What a pity life hadn't done the same for John.

§ 2

In bed that night Charlotte fell to wondering, not quite for the first time, if some secret could be troubling John, if he and Nan were as happy in their marriage as Dwight and Elizabeth. But of Maurice, for the moment, she was hardly allowing herself to think at all.

To let her thoughts stray in that direction involved too much danger. Maurice—said her sense of humour—was rather like a slight toothache. As long as one didn't allow one's mind to dwell on him, one stayed free from pain.

But one could not—said her common sense—continue scot free of that pain. Maurice had been named co-respondent in this very unpleasant divorce case—and the case would be public in a few months' time.

"Beastly", she caught herself thinking, a day or two later as she watched Maurice, and Nan, who had announced immediately on her arrival, "I've brought a habit with me. I'm just mad to be on a horse again even if it is only hacking", canter side by side up the slope to the Fort. "Beastly. But one's got to stand up for one's own. And it wasn't altogether his fault. The woman's years older than he is. He's only just over twenty-four. Besides, he's an artist."

As she turned back into the house—the care of so many guests kept one considerably occupied, despite the facts that Mrs. Baldock was such a treasure and that one had padded out one's ageing staff, Simeon, Kate and Ellen, with three extra girls from the village—Charlotte realised how often, since Maurice's return from Paris, and even before that, the thought of his being an artist, and therefore not quite amenable to the common code, had proved a consolation to her.

"Rupert was an artist, too", she caught herself thinking.

And alone on the terrace after she had finished her house-keeping—with two hours still to spare before lunch, her mother reading under the cedar, the children playing by the lake, and everybody else busy on their own occasions—her thoughts strayed so far in the forbidden direction that she had to pull them up with a sharp :

"That's something you don't know for certain, and something that you never can know for certain. So leave off worrying about it. Make up your mind that Maurice is different from the others—that he's a bit of a pickle—that he always will be a bit of a pickle—and that you've just got to go on helping him, standing up for him, being fond of him".

For it was always so fatally easy—especially if one were a child or a woman—to be fond of Maurice. His mother—at that period of his life—could no more resist his fascination than his grandmother or his sister or his sister-in-law.

"I think he's turned into an absolute darling", Elizabeth confided to Nan ; and Nan, linking arms with her as when they were both schoolgirls, said, "He's a jolly good painter, too. Of course John's a bit upset about this divorce case he's got himself into. But then you know what John is."

"Oh, rather", said Elizabeth. "John always was a bit of a Roundhead."

Dwight liked Maurice, too.

"People in England", he told Philip, "make too much fuss about divorce cases. They don't seem to know how to manage them. Not that I approve of the way they're done with us, mark you. We're a little too free and easy."

And, "Do you feel", continued Dwight Mansfield, who knew all the family gossip, "that Maurice and John have really buried the hatchet? I get a hunch, every now and again, that John hasn't. But of course that may only be my imagination".

"He's never let on about it to me if that's what you're driving at", said Philip. "Though naturally, in his position, he can't be looking forward to all the publicity. Can't say I'd be looking forward to it much either. But of course I shan't be in England. Do you realise we've only got another four days here, old chap?"

§ 3

It was just after tea time on the last day but one of the American invasion—with a heavy storm pelting at the mullioned windows—that Maurice, who had driven Nan over to Laxford for some shopping, came quietly into the Long Gallery, and went straight to Charlotte.

He had the racing edition of a London evening paper under his arm. But there was other news on the front page. He showed her the headlines, "Well-known Sportsman in Motoring Accident. Captain Gordon Morgan-Little Killed".

"Poor chap", he whispered. "Luck for me though. This'll wash everything out. At least I suppose it will. John ought to be able to tell us."

He went over to John who sat reading, a little apart from the rest of them, on the window seat. Charlotte saw her eldest son start as her youngest touched him on the shoulder; saw him glance at the newspaper.

The two conferred in low voices. She could almost see John's lips frame that final affirmative. Then Nan had come

into the room; and Maurice was grinning, Maurice was beginning, "As you're all here, you'd better all know at once——"

But Maurice's mother hardly heard any more. For in that moment she knew, with a knowledge that brooked no denial, the main truth about her youngest son's character.

Maurice might have said, might be repeating, that conventional "poor chap". But Morgan-Little's death meant no more to him, not as much to him, as a fly's. While the question of his own conduct troubled him even less. Only one thought obsessed Maurice—and he had confessed it to her in that one word "luck".

This youngest son of hers stood, and would always stand, in the foreground of his own picture. For all his good looks, for all his charm, he was essentially the egoist. And eventually this egoism must overshadow, must obliterate, must nullify every lesser good quality.

That much, she knew at once. Later—when he entered her room, and stooped over as she sat putting the last touches to her toilet, and kissed her, saying, "It's as much for your sake as my own that I'm so glad, because I'm sure you must have been hating it like blazes though you have been so jolly decent"—came a worse knowledge, that also brooking no denial, though forever beyond proof.

Her sin *had* found her out. No Carteret could look like this. No Carteret could speak like this. No Carteret could think or feel or act like this. This was Rupert—Rupert all over again.

§ 4

Later still that night, and once more next day after she had said goodbye to Dwight and Philip and Elizabeth, Charlotte summoned up enough courage to tell herself, "Even though it's true, there's nothing to panic about. You may know, but nobody else ever can. Besides, he only gets into scrapes. He could never do anything really disgraceful".

Nevertheless, with the house emptied and only Laura for company of an evening, she became increasingly afraid.

The precise nature of this fear continued to elude her in

exactly the same way as the precise nature of the change in his feelings towards Nan continued to elude John. Yet she was never free from it. It would dart out on her, in the most unexpected places, at the least anticipated moments.

The dangerous years—fear would suggest—were very far from over. Something terrible was going to happen. Something terrible was actually happening. And something she had no power to prevent.

She felt altogether powerless that autumn; and never, even after her husband's death, had she felt quite so lonely. Strangely, she began to miss that husband; to wonder whether she might not have grown to love him, had he lived, with a love far transcending the mere passion experienced for Rupert.

And, wondering about this, she would often fall to wondering about her relations with John.

She seemed to be drifting apart from John. Naturally enough, perhaps, considering that he was married, that he lived in London and she in the country. One did drift apart from one's children as they grew up and developed their own interests. Besides, John wrote so regularly, long letters from the office, with some such postscript as, "Sorry to bother you with all this business but after all it's just as much your affair as mine", or, "Thought you'd like to hear how everything was going on, excuse the typewriting but you know how busy I am", and always the conclusion, "Nan and Johnny join me in best love".

Still—was the drift quite natural? Once before John had kept a secret from her. So mightn't he be keeping another. Were Nan and he as happy as they always pretended? Was he as much in love with Nan as he always pretended?

People did pretend to each other. Even sons to mothers.

"And mothers to sons", thought Charlotte, remembering how successfully she had concealed her antipathy towards Nan. "But then that was necessary."

Nowadays, thank goodness, that pretence was no longer necessary. Since Johnny's birth—pity one couldn't see more of Johnny—one really had cured oneself of that old antipathy. As long as she went on making John happy—and he was so obviously still in love with her that she must be making him

happy—one would always keep quite a warm corner in one's heart for Nan.

The girl had brains. John wasn't everybody's husband; he must take quite a lot of managing. She had character; otherwise she wouldn't have stood up for Maurice.

Without her influence—hadn't she said so herself?—there might have been "a crashing row" between John and Maurice. And who else was there to keep an eye on Maurice in London, to look after him if he happened to fall ill?

"She promised she would", thought Charlotte, remembering another conversation between them as she sat reading Nan's letter that bright December morning. "And she has. I'm glad it's nothing serious. Just this influenza. She's quite right, though. He ought to come down here for a week or two before he starts work again."

§ 5

"So that's that", smiled Nan, reading Charlotte's answer aloud to Maurice. "And the sooner you toddle off the better."

He hitched at the cord of the dressing gown she had given him, and glanced round the studio before he said:

"All right. If you say so. But I'd much rather stay here".

"Don't be so obstinate. Why do you want to stay here? Because of some girl or other, I suppose."

"You've visited me every day for the last week, dear sister-in-law." His dark eyes twinkled. "So you'd have been sure to find out if there were anything like that going on."

"Isn't there?"

His eyes changed.

"Jealous?" he asked.

"Aren't you forgetting who I am?"

"No. But I sometimes wish I could."

"Maurice." Nan bit her lips. Her eyes, too, changed. "Don't say that, even in fun. It was only in fun, wasn't it?"

"Of course. I'm not that sort of cad—even though I do borrow money from you."

"You needn't remind me of that."

She held out her hand. Her fingers seemed very cold, and her voice not quite her own.

"Well, ta-ta", she went on. "I must be getting back to my other nursery. Have a good time at the Manor. You'll be fit enough to hunt in a week. Lucky devil. I'd give something to be with hounds again."

"There's no reason why you shouldn't be. Leave John to look after the baby one week end. Mother ought to be able to mount you. She's got quite a stable this season."

"What a hope."

She relinquished his hand and went out quickly. He called after her down the staircase :

"I don't see why it can't be managed. I'll ask mother and write you".

She called back, "Better let her write to me".

Maurice grinned. It was so funny that he and Nan should have to keep their friendship almost as secret from John as though it were a love affair.

Gorgeous creature, Nan. They'd always got on like a house on fire. They really understood each other.

If only she weren't *John's* wife.

CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

§ 1

"THERE's nothing to be afraid of", thought Nan Carteret, reading her mother-in-law's letter. "Only—I wish John would come too."

The strangeness of that thought was like a cut with a whip. Why on earth should she be wanting John—John of all people—to come with her? The want seemed so unnatural, considering what a constant strain it had been, all these last months, to keep John even moderately contented. Maurice wouldn't appreciate his company, either.

All the same, she was afraid of going to the Manor alone.

Lying very still in the firelight, she read Charlotte's invitation again. What could be more harmless than to visit one's mother-in-law from a Friday to a Monday? What could be more fun—even if one were as stiff as blazes afterwards—than a day in the saddle with the old pack?

Besides, she'd as good as suggested this visit herself. So how could she get out of it? She couldn't write, "I can't imagine what put *that* idea into Maurice's head". It would make him look so silly.

And she wasn't afraid of Maurice. He had no idea of making love to her. He would never dare begin making love to her. But supposing he did dare? What then?

That thought was not strange. She had been dallying with it, off and on, ever since their goodbye in the studio. Always guiltily, yet with a certain perverse pleasure in the very guilt.

Latterly such dalliances in the realm of imagination had grown more and more thrilling. Physical adventures might, must be forbidden. One was sure to be found out eventually, and that—with a husband like John—would mean losing

"Harry". But one couldn't be punished for mental adventures, however desperate.

Couldn't one, though? What about one's beastly conscience? And was one quite as strong as one imagined? Supposing Maurice had said, "No. It wasn't in fun. I do wish I could forget who you are, not sometimes, but always"?

Face white, knees taut, she rose from the sofa, and went slowly upstairs to the night nursery. The child was just back from the new bathroom she had made John put in while they were away at the Manor.

"You are late, mummy", he grumbled. "I nearly said my prayers without you."

She took the chair by his cot. He knelt at her knee. "Please Jesus, make me a good boy", he lisped. "Bless mummy and daddy and make them very happy."

"Dear Jesus!" she caught herself praying. "Save me. For my baby's sake. Don't let me even imagine things he would hate me for."

Praying, she looked up to see John at the door.

§ 2

That night John seemed less tired than usual. He put his son to bed himself; and told him a favourite story. Watching them together, Nan thought, "There isn't a better man in the world. I have been a swine to him". As they left the night nursery she took his arm.

The warmth of her gesture seemed to surprise him.

"Is anything the matter?" he asked.

"Matter. No. Why should there be?"

"I don't know. I thought you might be worried about something. You haven't been looking too fit these last few days."

"Oh, I'm as right as rain."

The stairs were narrow. She had to release his arm. They came down to their own floor. He took a step towards his dressing room.

"Any news?" he asked.

"Yes. There's a letter from granny. John"—the words tumbled over one another—"she's asked me down for the week end. She says she can mount me. I'd give anything to go but I do wish you'd come too. Can't you give the office a miss for once? Can't you get away by half-past four on Friday afternoon? It'd do you so much good to have a really good breath of country air."

He turned; stared at her.

"But you haven't hunted for years", he began.

"Never mind about that. Will you come with me?"

"I don't see how I can."

"Well, think it over while you're dressing."

"All right."

§ 3

John went to his own room. Hearing him open the wardrobe, Nan thought, "He ought to have his clothes put out for him—even though we do only keep a house-parlourmaid. I ought to do it for him. I ought to do ever so much more for him. It isn't as though he had both his legs".

In her own room the gas stove glowed red and comfortable. As she warmed herself at it, thought continued, "He ought to have one, too . . . He can't have been in here more than half a dozen times since we came back from the Manor . . . Perhaps he doesn't love me any more . . . After all, why should he? . . . I don't deserve it".

Her frock lay on the bed. Her evening shoes had been put out. These circumstances, too, reproached her. When she heard him go straight to the drawing room while she still sat at her mirror, thought concluded, "This is what it's come to in less than seven years".

She put the last touches to her face and went down to the drawing room. John sat in his usual chair. As usual, he was reading his paper.

"Everybody seems to be getting these wireless gadgets", he said. "There's a long article about it. How about our getting one? It might be rather amusing."

"But aren't the decent ones fearfully expensive?"

"They do cost a bit. Still, we're not as hard up as we were

when we started . . . By the way, George has definitely made up his mind to retire."

He continued to talk about George's retirement. She knew why. He was avoiding the point at issue—whether or no he should take the week end off.

The new maid—they had been subjected to what Nan called a "spot of domestic trouble" since the summer—announced dinner. The new cook's efforts were slightly disappointing. She consoled herself with the knowledge, "John never notices what he eats, and thank goodness he never grumbles".

"I think", she said, with the table cleared and the decanter under John's fingers, "that I'll be a devil tonight and have a glass of port with you. Can I have a cigarette, too?"

"Why not? It isn't vintage."

He passed over a full glass, the cigarette box, the matches. The maid brought in the cona.

"It isn't so often we have a night off", smiled Nan, stirring the coffee after the first boil. "Rather nice, once in a way. Or does it bore you, being alone with me?"

She had surprised him again. His eyes quizzed her.

"I should have thought", he said slowly, "that the boot was on the other leg."

It seemed less hypocritical not to protest. She finished her chore with the cona; sugared and passed him his cup.

"I *am* more restless than you are", she confessed. "But then I don't have to work so hard. Have I been very trying lately?"

Her directness drew the counter-confession:

"Just a little difficult perhaps".

"I'm sorry. I get on edge sometimes."

"Yes. We both do. That's inevitable, I suppose."

Nan brooded, "So it's gone as far as that, has it?" Aloud she said:

"We oughtn't to. We were quite different when we started. It's all my fault, I expect".

His brown eyes softened. She could see that she had struck the right note. It was necessary—vital—that she should continue to strike the right note. Otherwise he wouldn't come to the Manor.

"John", she continued, without waiting for an answer, "I'm so sorry. I'm not making you happy."

He denied that stoutly, "Now you're talking nonsense. Just because we don't always see eye to eye about things!"

"It isn't entirely nonsense. I don't always make you happy."

"If this is what you call having the devil in you, I'm afraid his satanic majesty is rather lachrymose."

"Don't. There's a dear. I really am serious."

Curiously, that was true. She did not love this man. She could never love him. That particular emotion had died with Harry Rackstraw. But she did "care for him". She respected him. And his love was necessary to her. Without it, she would be spun.

"Silly", she thought superficially. "I'm only trying to get my own way."

Yet the underlying truth persisted; and her eyes, too, softened as she went on:

"John, let's get down to tintacks. Just this once. Things haven't been going any too well for some time now. We're neither of us fools and we both know it. Let's try and make them go better. Shall we? I'm game if you are".

Holding his reply, John Carteret scrutinised his wife's face for long seconds. How lovely she was. Yet would he ever understand her? Did he quite trust her? One learned so much about women in a solicitor's office.

Then her lips smiled, a hand crept across the table towards his, and all that was loving, all that was loyal in him, united to proclaim her complete honesty.

"That's pretty splendid of you", he said slowly. "Because it hasn't all been your fault. Not by a long chalk."

"You are game then?"

"Rather."

She rose on that, sidled round the table, and put her arms about him, holding him close.

"Darling!"

Her lips brushed his. His mouth fastened on them.

"Nan."

"Yes, my sweet."

"I love you so much. Do you really want me to come to the Manor?"

Her victory was won. She began to make light of it. He mustn't take the week end off, if it would interfere with his work. She knew how much his work meant to him.

"It doesn't mean as much as you do, Nan."

"It's so lovely to hear you say that. And granny will simply adore having you. I'll write and tell her at once."

"Wouldn't tomorrow do as well?"

"Perhaps it would. Perhaps we'd better go to bed early tonight."

Once more she smiled at him. Still holding her hands, he smiled back at her, "Yes. I should like that".

His breathing woke her before dawn. He lay on his back. She tiptoed out of bed, roused him, made him turn on his side.

Still half-asleep, he said, "Sorry if I disturbed you, darling".

Back between her own sheets, she thought, stupidly, "He's so good to me. Always. He makes me feel so small. Is that why I can't love him? If so, I must be a very wicked woman".

And once again she was afraid.

§ 4

Daylight brought back Nan's courage; and for the next forty-eight hours she went her normal ways. Charlotte telegraphed, "Letter received arranged John shoot Saturday tell him bring cartridges".

She acknowledged the wire and wrote a dutiful letter to her stepmother. "Because Gladys", she told John, "is sure to be at the meet."

Then, on the Thursday morning, Gladys wired, "Big lunch party Sunday hope you'll both come"—and, for no reason she could imagine, fear's whip cut her again.

All that day she, like Charlotte, had her prescience of disaster. Something terrible was going to happen. She might accept Gladys' invitation—but she would never see Gladys again.

"Barmy", she assured herself while she did her morning's round of the provision shops.

"Completely barmy", she reassured herself as she walked round for an afternoon's bridge at the club she had just joined.

But the very cards she held, each hand more astoundingly cast-iron than the last one, seemed to prognosticate disaster. "Lucky at cards", she thought; and could almost feel herself shuddering every time she won.

Habitually careful with money, she rarely took taxis. Bridge finished, however, the ten minutes or so she would save seemed of vital importance. "Harry" might have been taken ill. He must have had an accident. So certain did she become of this during the short drive that she could hardly believe her own eyes when she found the boy safe in his nursery, "playing trains".

But, hearing him say his prayers, tucking him in his little bed, she experienced the most horrible conviction. She was doing these things for the very last time!

John's return—later even than usual, with the excuse, "There was a lot of stuff I simply had to clear up as I'm making a short day of it tomorrow"—subdued fear. She told him he mustn't worry to dress, and poured herself a biggish glass of his brown sherry.

Dinner over, she insisted on helping him while he packed.

His shooting clothes and boots took up a lot of space. She fetched him a second case from the attic.

"You're being a perfect model of duty", he chaffed.

"Our new regime", she managed to chaff back; and the cases on the floor provided sufficient excuse for her casual, "Conjugal couches tonight. You've hardly got room to undress in here."

Towards midnight, with John quietly asleep, she found herself wishing, for the first time in her married life, that these two beds had been one. Sleepless, she craved the comfort of proximity. If only she could put out a hand, just touch John's shoulder.

But ten minutes later she drifted into unconsciousness and only awoke—on the words, "Now then. Tea's been in the best part of a quarter of an hour. I've had mine and I'm going to the bathroom"—to a vast excitement in which fear found no place.

Suddenly she was looking forward to this visit, to her day's hunting, more than she had ever looked forward to anything. She told John so when she came down to breakfast, and begged him "not to cut things too fine" at the station.

"You always leave it to the last minute", she said. "And it always makes me nervous. By the way, your cartridges haven't come. But don't worry, I'll cope with that for you."

She had looked through her hunting kit days ago. But she inspected it again before she telephoned John's gunsmith, before she gave some final instructions to her cook and set about her own packing. Just before luncheon, she "dashed out" to buy another pair of string gloves.

Lunch with the talkative child brought no return of that horrible conviction. "Harry" wanted to know all about fox hunting: "Is it just like the wallpaper in my day nursery—everybody in red coats?"

"Can't I learn to ride?" he pleaded.

"Not until you're six, darling."

"Why can't I? Nanny took me to Hyde Park yesterday. Lots start ever so much younger than I am. I seed them."

"Saw them."

"All right. Sawed them. One was a girl, too. Not half as big as I am."

"I'm sure he's going to be handsomer than John", Nan thought. "And taller."

Parting with him, waving to him from the top step as nurse wheeled him away, she remained completely unconscious of past forebodings. If she felt in any way nervous it was about her horsemanship. Maurice, queerly enough, she had as good as forgotten until she stepped into the taxi. Then the thought of him, the actual picture of him, came back with a rush.

"I shouldn't be doing this", she knew, "if he hadn't suggested it."

Actual fear, nevertheless, continued to stand away; and even John's lateness—he stepped into the carriage exactly thirty seconds before the train steamed out of the station—only made her laugh,

CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO

§ 1

Dusk fell before Nan and John were twenty miles out of London. By the time they detrained at Laxford Junction it had been dark for two hours.

Maurice, countrified in homespun, a pipe between his teeth and a check cap worn jauntily over one eye, strolled up to grin :

"Mother's plunged in good works. Girl Guides or something. So I've come for you in Bullnose Billy, the pride of the garage. How we Carterets do live. Two motor cars if you please".

He led the way to the open Morris ; and asked Nan if he should put up the hood.

"Thank the lord for that", he said when she told him not to bother. "I always pinch my hand in the damn things."

While the porter was piling their luggage aboard under John's instructions, he settled her in the front seat and tucked a rug round her knees, leaning close to whisper, "What on earth put this idea into hubby's head ?"

"I did", said Nan in an even lower whisper ; and turned to ask, "Are you sure you'll be comfortable at the back, John ? I don't mind changing a bit."

She realised, with a slightly malicious pleasure, that she had given Maurice a distinct shock. Yet underlying that realisation was another, not nearly so pleasurable. Why had she gone out of her way to show Maurice that she and John were on better terms ?

The boy had a subtle mind—rather like her own in some ways. He might misunderstand. He might think her afraid of him. Not that she was—here, in this country atmosphere, with John so close, with John saying, "You stay where you

are, sweetheart. I'll manage to wedge myself in somehow or other".

"Where's John shooting tomorrow?" she asked Maurice.

"With a gallant general, I believe."

"What—old Frobisher. I didn't know he was still alive."

"He isn't. It's some other ruddy general."

John climbed in at last. Maurice started his engine.

"All for less than two hundred", he went on. "The wonders of science will never cease. She can shift, too."

"Don't drive too fast, or those cases may topple over and hurt John's leg", said Nan.

Maurice glanced at her sideways.

"More wonders of science", he remarked, as he switched on his headlights.

But Nan sensed the ulterior meaning well enough.

§ 2

For the moment Charlotte's fears—like Nan's—were in abeyance. The arrival of Maurice, relieving loneliness, had put them to sleep. One might—one did—disapprove of the boy's whole outlook on life. But how much one enjoyed his company. As much as one had always enjoyed his father's! Disturbing thought.

The recent months, however, had almost accustomed Charlotte to that thought. It was no use dwelling on the past. Fences were made to be jumped. Thank God, though—if He existed, a fact of which one could never be quite certain—that Rupert had not come back from the war.

"He'd have sensed it", Charlotte used to imagine. "He'd have known." But nobody else did, and nobody ever would.

Accordingly, no harm had been done, except to her own conscience. And her own conscience was her own private affair.

Given her life to live over again, needless to say, she would not have committed the sin. But after all she had been very young; and "the sins of youth were hardly sins". Comforted by the quotation, she told herself that she must apply the same leniency to Maurice.

Two points, nevertheless, puzzled her. First, why had she taken so long to assure herself that Maurice was not her husband's son? Secondly, why didn't she love him better than any of her other children? In all the books she had ever read, the love child was the favourite. But then, books weren't life.

She happened to be thinking that as she heard the little car chug its way up to the terrace. But thought disappeared in a new gush of tenderness when John entered the morning room. Not in years had she seen this eldest son of hers looking so happy. And John's happiness meant so much to her. Because she had always loved him better than any of her children. No getting away from that.

He kissed her, and she felt a new warmth in his kiss.

"Nan insisted", he said in answer to her question, "How did you manage to break away from the office?"

His wife followed him into the room. Charlotte's tenderness embraced her too. Nan had done so much for John, so much for both of them.

"And how's my grandson?" she asked.

John answered, "Fighting fit. He thinks he's being badly treated because he isn't allowed to ride yet".

"You'd been blooded at his age", laughed Charlotte.

"Me, too." Maurice had lounged in after Nan. "And perhaps by the time my grandson is, Philip will have made enough money to stand us an electric light plant."

"I had a letter about that", said Charlotte quietly, "by this afternoon's post."

She walked to the Chippendale bureau, took out the letter and put it in John's hands. Nan looked over his shoulder while he was reading.

"But how has he managed to make all that money?" John's voice was faintly disapproving. "And how on earth can we take it from him?"

"It's a very old promise", said Charlotte. "He'll be terribly offended if we don't."

Simeon brought in sherry. They continued to discuss Philip.

"But it can't be going to cost all that", put in Maurice.

"You forget", explained his mother, "what a very old house this is. We can't afford to take any risks of fire."

"Philip must have taken risks." Nan spoke. "He couldn't have saved a thousand pounds out of his salary."

"No." John's voice still held that faint note of disapproval. "He must have made it on the Stock Exchange. Dwight and he were always a bit jumpy till they'd read the American quotations."

"Well, there's nothing immoral about making money on the Stock Exchange", snapped Maurice; and, just for a second, hostility showed in his dark eyes.

"Why is John such a prig?" he thought. "And what did Nan want to drag him down here for?"

Then Laura came in, and tension eased.

§ 3

"I'm sorry for that old trout", continued Maurice's thoughts as he made his way upstairs to his bedroom. "Though I must say her affection for the family is rather overwhelming. And what a memory she's got."

He walked to his wardrobe, opened the door, and inspected the latest achievement of Laura's memory—the finding, in a tin trunk, of an old red hunting coat, a waistcoat, two pairs of white breeches, and a pair of top boots that fitted Maurice as though they had been made for him.

"They've been stored away for years", Laura had said. "Captain Whittinghame asked me to look after them. I'm sure your mother won't mind. It's such a long time ago."

His mother—it seemed to him—had been a little shocked. But he'd got round her all right. He could always get round people if he took enough trouble. After all, it would be silly not to use the things.

And with this top hat he'd just bought himself in Laxford—one thing about country shopkeepers, they never pestered you for their accounts—he'd look the goods tomorrow.

He took the hat out of its box, cocked it at the correct angle on his flaxen head, inspected himself in the mirror, and put it back again. Then he lit one of the fat Turkish cigarettes he affected; and began to undress.

Usually he sang and smoked during the whole process.

But tonight, once sitting down to draw on his trousers, he felt suddenly depressed.

Come to think of it, life in England wasn't nearly the fun it had been in Paris. He'd always had some amourette or other on when he lived there—some girl who didn't take things too seriously, and yet quite seriously enough. And an artist needed tha sort of affair. He had to be more or less *épris*—even if it was only for a few days with a woman like Edna—if he were to do his best work.

"I can't be gross about my affairs", brooded Maurice. "I've got to imagine I'm in love with the girl, even if I'm not really."

And abruptly his thoughts turned to Nan.

Now there was a young woman with whom one could fall in love. Only of course one mustn't let oneself. Except in one's imagination. John's wife and all that! Still, if he knew anything about the sex, Nan would take a lover sooner or later. John *bored* her. And no wonder. John would have that effect on any woman with a bit of fire, a bit of go in her.

A good fellow. But too bally good. One simply couldn't live up to him. Pre-war! Like mother. The sooner one got one's money out of John's clutches the better. One could pay off everybody then, including Nan.

Thought, as usual after so long a spell, became slightly inconsequent. Singing again, Maurice put on his dinner jacket and sauntered downstairs to find Nan alone before the fire in the hall.

"You were a bit mysterious at the station", he began without preamble.

"Was I?"

"Well, I thought so."

"And of course you're a great judge."

Her blue eyes seemed very hard. But he had been looked at in the same way before. Did she really imagine him a man of so little experience?

"Perhaps not such a bad one as you imagine", he retorted; and, a little carried away, "I admit that the situation is a little delicate, as we say in France. However, I'm completely trustworthy. There was no reason to bring a bodyguard."

For a second he thought Nan was going to hit him. Then she laughed, maddeningly ; and, after another second or so, continued :

"I take back what I said about your not being a good judge. You've grasped the position admirably. Except for one small point. In future, the bodyguard will be permanent".

He, also, took refuge in laughter.

"Pulled your leg good and proper for once, sweet sister-in-law."

"I should have said it was the other way round, dear brother-in-law."

But although they spoke so lightly, each realised a relationship at crisis ; each sensed a peril—and a very real peril—common, to both.

Each realised, moreover, when his heavy foot sounded on the staircase above them, a most peculiar gladness at the sight of John.

§ 4

Throughout dinner, Nan tried to keep her eyes, her conscious thoughts, her every controllable instinct on John. He was her husband. He was the best man in the world. She had not married him under any illusion. Over and above this, he was the father of her son.

"He's looking so happy tonight", she thought. Yet the mere thought seemed a reproach.

John's momentary happiness was founded on the illusion that she loved him. Whereas if she loved anybody . . .

But farther than that, she would not let even her subconscious mind go.

All the same, her conscious mind could not help remarking Maurice's comparative silence ; and towards the end of the meal she experienced a sudden sympathy for him. Maurice could no more help his nature than she could help hers. He would always make love to the nearest woman, provided she were reasonably attractive and not too stand-offish.

"I ought to have been more stand-offish", she knew ; and brought up all such thoughts with a round turn as Charlotte said :

"About tomorrow, dear. The horse I meant you to ride put me down rather badly on Wednesday. So I've decided you're to have Rapsallion. That's the big black with the silver blaze you saw out at grass in the summer. I bought him from your Willoughby you may remember. He was just a little hot till towards the end of last season. But that was your Willoughby's own doing. You know the sort of hands he's got. This year he's going marvellously. All you'll have to do is to sit on him".

"And let me give you a lead", put in Maurice.

"As though I didn't know the country a jolly sight better than you do."

"All right, Mrs. First-Flighter."

Maurice and Nan continued to spat. Listening to them, Charlotte was aware of a slight discomfort. Somehow or other, the chaff did not sound quite natural. Weren't these two young people rather on edge?

The mental question stopped there. In another moment or so, she had forgotten it. But the temporary distraction sufficed to make her forget something else—Rapsallion's dislike of water. And, almost immediately, John turned the talk on shooting, and from that to politics.

"We look as though we were getting out of our troubles at last", he said. "The Locarno treaty really is a big step in the right direction."

His mother had never known him so garrulous or so averse to leaving the dinner table. It was half-past nine before they took chairs in front of the fireplace in the Long Gallery; and by ten o'clock he was ordering Nan to bed.

"You'll have a hard day tomorrow", he told her. "So you'd better get all the rest you can."

Nan smiled obediently, kissed and left them. Laura soon followed her example. A little later Maurice said, "I expect you two would like a real heart-to-heart".

His tact had its effect on both of them. "He has his points", thought John; and Charlotte, "That really was thoughtful of him."

They sat on before the glowing logs, very happily, talking of Johnny for the most part, while John drank his last whiskey

and soda. Just at the last Charlotte ventured, "You've been lucky in your marriage, dear".

He brooded for a moment. Then he said, "It's funny you should say that, mother".

"Why?"

"Because I was thinking the same thing. Nan's really a wonderful girl, though she is a little difficult to understand sometimes."

"Well, you never were much of a ladies' man."

"No. That's been the trouble, I expect."

Hesitantly she ventured one step farther.

"Then it hasn't always been smooth sailing?"

"You mustn't think that." He in his turn hesitated. "We've only had one real quarrel in our lives, and that was entirely my fault for losing my temper. And anyway it's all washed out now. Her doing, too."

He smiled to himself. Her imagination seemed to tell her the rest of the story. She leaned forward to put a hand on his knee.

"Go on being happy", she said.

"There's no fear about that now."

Her imagination seemed to conclude the story. They put out the lamps; lit the last two candles on the hall table; went upstairs; kissed at her bedroom door.

"Sleep well, dear", said Charlotte.

§ 5

When John entered their own bedroom, Nan had her head on the pillow.

"Is that you?" she asked.

"Yes, darling. I'll be as quiet as I can."

"I'm not as sleepy as all that. Come here a minute."

He put down his candle and went over to the double bed. She stretched up her arms to him.

"John, do you still love me?"

"Of course I do."

"You're sure?" She pulled his face down to hers.

"Why do you ask that?"

"Because it makes all the difference."

She was still only half-asleep when he crept in beside her. They talked a little before he blew out the candle. Waking for a few seconds in pitch darkness, he had the vaguest impression that one of her hands fondled him.

But sleep left him with no trace of that impression. Neither did he know how long she had lain wakeful, praying blindly, "Make me love him. Make me love him. Because otherwise I really am spun".

CHAPTER SIXTY-THREE

§ 1

ONLY as she encountered Nan emerging from the bathroom did Laura Marston realise the date, and that this was her fifty-eighth birthday. But nobody else would be likely to remember that.

Nobody had, she saw, as she entered the dining room. There were no letters, not even a postcard, beside her plate.

The Norwich clock showed her how fast her own watch must be. Another quarter of an hour at least before anyone would appear for breakfast. She wandered out into the hall, and looked up at the picture of John's father. Her eyes blurred a little. Time went so quickly. It seemed such a short while ago since she had refused the man in the picture a kiss.

"I wish I'd let him", she thought. "Not that he really wanted to. I was always plain."

The thought made her smile. What a silly old woman she was going to be. A happy old woman though. She had her little niche in life. Charlotte would never get rid of her now.

She turned to see Charlotte coming downstairs. What a marvellous figure she made. How young she still looked. And this morning she seemed in the best of tempers.

"Fine day, Laura", she said. "Not a breath of wind. The sun'll be out soon. You really ought to come to the meet. Why don't you?"

"Oh, I've got such a lot of things to do, Lady Carteret."

"Such as?"

Simeon rang the gong. Still talking, they went in to breakfast. Five minutes brought John, in thick tweed trousers and a shooting jacket with leather shoulder-pieces.

"What time ought I to be off?" he asked.

"Not later than a quarter-past nine, dear. The general

promised he'd send his car for you. I'm having one of the boys taught to drive now we've got a second one. But he isn't quite to be trusted yet."

Nan followed John. Maurice was even later than usual. When he appeared he wore stockings pulled up over his breeches, no stock, and a velvet coat.

"Apologies for the fancy dress", he grinned. "No time for anything else. As a matter of fact I had a really rotten night."

"You look it", said Nan. "What's that under your left eye? Did you forget to wash your face?"

"I did not. That's my weasel mark if you want to know. It does show up sometimes."

John, who had finished eating, told Nan the story of Maurice's weasel, chuckling at the end of it, "That's about the only bit of life-saving I ever did. Do you think it was worthwhile?"

"I doubt it."

"You're a nice loving kind of sister-in-law, I must say."

Again, as she listened to those three chaffing one another, Charlotte was aware of a slight discomfort, of something vaguely abnormal. But almost at once John, with a final, "Putting the most modest estimate on my brotherly services, I saved one of his eyes. Think what a service that's been to British art", folded up his napkin and went from the room.

"I presume we only get a horse each", said Maurice then. "That means I'll have to pull out by about two o'clock. Rapsallion can go all day, and win a midnight steeplechase to finish up with."

Nan said, "I expect I'll have had all I want by change-over"; and followed John, whom she found in the gunroom.

"How soon do you have to start?" she asked.

"As soon as the general's car turns up."

He stuffed a few cartridges into his pockets; poured the rest of the box into his bag. Doing so, a sudden memory prompted him to say:

"It always used to make me a bit nervous when you were out hunting. You will be careful, won't you?"

Nan laughed. The thrill of the chase was on her again.

"Am I to promise that I won't jump?" she asked.

"Don't be such a goose. Only—don't take too many risks."

Something made him add, "For my sake". Something made her kiss him.

"Who's being the goose now?" she asked.

Tyres on gravel disturbed them. Through the little barred window they saw a big blue car brake by the front door. John slung his bag, picked up his guncase.

"You can't manage that as well", said Nan; and took the shooting stick from him.

The hall was empty. She followed him out to the car. The chauffeur helped him in.

"See you at tea time or a little after", he called as he was driven off. "Don't forget the mustard in your bath."

Nan watched the blue back of the limousine dwindle round the lake and through the lodge gates. The sun was just breaking through gray clouds.

"I wonder why I'm so nervous", she thought. "I'm sure to be all right once I'm mounted. After all, one needn't go any harder than one wants to."

But, as she turned back into the house, she knew—just for one ghastly moment—that this nervousness had nothing whatever to do with the prospect of a day's hunting; and, upstairs in her bedroom, putting on her hat, she caught herself thinking:

"We neither of us slept. Every time we see each other, every time we begin talking to each other, we're on edge. It can't go on like this. It mustn't go on like this. It mustn't go on at all. I must stop seeing Maurice. I must never go to his studio any more".

"I used to say that to myself about Harry Rackstraw", she remembered. "But it didn't do any good. Nothing does when one . . . really wants somebody."

It seemed so extraordinary to be on one's knees in a hunting habit—praying, actually praying, "Dear Jesus, don't let me. For my baby's sake".

Ellen nearly caught her at it, too.

"You are barmy", thought concluded. "Just think what an ass you'd have looked."

Then she stiffened her knees, took her whip and went downstairs.

§ 2

Nerves formed no part of Charlotte's hunting equipment; and, unlike Nan, she had slept the night through without even one subconscious disturbance. Satisfied of John's happiness, she could look back on the emotional crisis of these last months as something entirely reasonless, possibly connected with her state of health.

Nothing terrible was going to happen. On the contrary. The future had never looked more assured. All the same—she said to herself as she went up to her room—one might just as well brace oneself against the coming shock.

"That fool of a Laura", she thought, taking her top hat from its box. "Just because Maurice is so vain he doesn't like hunting in ratcatcher. At least I'm prepared for it though. I expected it at breakfast."

Then she heard Maurice singing as he came from his bedroom; and he rapped on her door, burst in to ask, "Do I look the part or don't I?"

Everything he wore, had been Rupert's. The very attitude he struck proved him no Carteret. Yet this was not the Rupert whom she had been about to marry just before the war—but a younger man, tapping his leggings with his whip as he stood on the doorstep in Montpelier Square to ask, "I suppose I couldn't come in for a moment?"

"You look very nice", said Charlotte slowly; but once more fear was on her; and she had to fight with herself as Maurice turned away, and went, spurs clinking, down the stairs.

"Steady", she had to say to herself. "There isn't all that resemblance. It's largely in your own imagination."

And yet, if her husband had not been drowned, wouldn't he have suspected? Might not others suspect? Supposing John ever did?

"He'd hate me for it", she thought. "He's the last man in the world to understand."

The worst of her fear went by as she adjusted her hat and

veil. Thank goodness she was hunting today. Going her hardest, she could forget.

Putting up her booted foot on the dressing stool to strap her long spur, she had a fleeting memory of the days when she would never have finished dressing without Kate.

"I've done some good anyway", she consoled herself. "I've kept things together. I've kept the old life, the old place, going. Johnny will be proud of his inheritance." And just for a second her mind flickered forward. Men and women passed on. But the fields and the houses stood.

"Nearing fifty", she found herself thinking. "Call it two-thirds of the way. You're still between the flags. You've still got to ride a good finish."

But on that, as in every crisis, her sense of humour came to her aid.

"You dramatise yourself", she concluded. "You'll be writing novels next. 'Lady Charlotte's Secret', or 'The Blot on the Escutcheon'."

Then she heard Maurice calling, "I say, hurry up, mother. We're simply champing our bits down here"; flicked a spot of powder from her apron; joined him and Nan in the hall.

§ 3

To Maurice and his sister-in-law the appearance of Charlotte was a relief. They had been waiting for her the best part of ten minutes—and every one of those minutes charged with curious emotions. Now the situation seemed normal again—only an undercurrent of tension between them.

"But he knows", thought Nan. "He knows."

She took her flask and sandwich case from the hall table. Maurice offered to carry them for her. She said, "We are being polite today". Their bare hands touched. John's brother! And she wanted him. Desperately.

Hell!

Charlotte said, "Come along, children, it's time we repaired to the stables". They followed her into open air. Glancing sideways at Maurice, Nan saw him readjust his hat, tilting it just a little over one eye.

Years ago, she had seen another man in a double-breasted cutaway with his hat tilted to just that angle make just this same figure of devil-may-careness. But that old picture was submerged in present sensations.

Only Charlotte revisualised Rupert as Maurice swaggered across the stable tiles.

The young groom who acted as her second horseman, the boy who was his only helper, led out Rapsallion, and her own mount—a flea-bitten roan she had picked up for a song (everybody knowing his character) at the Repositories. Maurice was to ride Flyaway, another bargain. She warned Maurice to keep the chestnut away from bicycles, for which he had a peculiar aversion.

He grinned at Nan, "What mother really means is that he'll kick the eyes out of anything that gets behind him. We're some horsemen in our family. Believe me, we have to be. But you'll be all right. Rapsallion hasn't got any vices".

And once more, still obsessed with the picture of Rupert, Charlotte forgot to warn Nan of the big black's dislike for water, though she herself snapped the leather from the side-saddle and snapped it back again before she would allow her daughter-in-law to mount.

"Habit", she laughed. "I was dragged my first season."

Nan laughed back, "Mother always made me do it"; thinking, "That's funny. I haven't thought of mother for years".

They mounted and walked off single file—Charlotte leading, Nan behind her, through the gates and round the terrace. There, both women kicked to a trot. They kept to the gravel. Maurice on Flyaway went straight across the exercise field; jumped the fence between the field and the lodge gates, and pulled up there to wait for them. Five minutes more and they were out of sight of the black and white house in the dip of the big pasture under the foot of King's Oak Hill.

"Which way now?" asked Maurice; and Nan laughed at him, "I thought you knew every inch of the country. The middle gate, of course. Then Abercorn Wood—Black Wood—and we're there".

Where the two rides cross in Abercorn Wood, they fell in with Gladys and her Horatio, who swept off his hat and

addressed them as though they were a meeting of shareholders.

"My old Rapscaillon's looking a perfect picture", he said, falling in beside Nan. "So's my stepdaughter if it comes to that."

"Half-stepdaughter", Nan chaffed him.

"Meaning that you refuse to recognise me as a relative?"

"Oh, no. We *are* coming to lunch tomorrow."

"But you never come to stay with us."

"Be careful. If I really start hunting, I may want to come and live with you every season."

"Well, I'm sure you'd be very welcome."

"He isn't so bad", Nan thought; and, as they emerged into the cool sunshine, she began to feel strangely comforted. At ease with this good horse under her, she seemed suddenly at ease with the world.

This was the way to live, in the clean cool countryside. If only John had been able to keep up the Manor without working. She would have been all right then. No studio, with its atmosphere of Bohemianism when Maurice gave a party, its atmosphere of . . . temptation when they were alone, talking so lightly yet so dangerously while London darkled and the footsteps went up and down the courtyard outside.

Abercorn Wood was by now; heading left from the turnpike—with Maurice dismounting to hold the gate—they made the central cutting through Black Wood up which Charlotte and Rupert had ridden in the eeriness of twilight so many years before.

Willy nilly Charlotte remembered that ride, and Rupert's comment, "Eerie-looking place. Gives me the shivers", as they came out of the wood and the horse hoofs rapped Abercorn Bridge.

"If we don't get a move on", said Gladys there, "they'll have thrown off."

She tapped her three-hundred-guinea bay to a perfect canter; and Charlotte, checking the roan, experienced a moment's envy. Money counted in the hunting field. If only she'd had more money, she could have accepted the joint mastership.

One managed to keep going though. And that was the great thing.

Willoughby also cantered by, as she and Nan waited for Maurice, who had fallen behind in Black Wood, and came up slightly out of breath, saying, "This beast's a bit above himself. We had quite an argument before he would permit me to resume equitation".

But Flyaway simmered down before they were across the light plough and trotting along the grass at roadside for the big open gates of Abercorn Park.

CHAPTER SIXTY-FOUR

§ 1

THERE followed, for Charlotte, two hours of comparative boredom. These Saturday meets were becoming altogether too popular. The motor car was at fault, of course. People didn't have to hack to their meets any more. And one never saw a dog cart.

"Four hundred at least", she thought, as she watched hounds put in. "And half of them have come from anywhere. And if we get a decent run with all these infernal followers it'll be a miracle."

The first fox was headed; the second found an unstopped earth, and was dug out—a kill she always thought unsporting. Today, too, Loosebit (more generally called Lousebites) gave her nothing but trouble. And if she knew anything about weather they were in for a storm sooner or later.

"Nothing but rain ever since November", she brooded. "Chances are it'll freeze next." And again, willy nilly, she remembered that long-ago season, when it had only thawed just in time for the Boxing Day meet.

Their next hunting, a ringing one, took them towards the same country. By the time they lost their fox, the sun was only a pale ball of lemon above the far trees of Three Corner Wood.

All these two hours, she had lost sight of Maurice. Now he rode up to her.

"Where's Nan?" she asked.

"Oh, somewhere about. Flyaway's being a bit of a nuisance. I told her to keep away from his heels."

Once more memories of that long-ago hunt crowded into Charlotte's mind. She could almost hear this same Maurice, only just at Harrow, saying, "I couldn't see Leacock and Tom

anywhere, so I thought I'd better come along with the crowd".

Meanwhile most of the field were off the road—and her roan was making more trouble.

"I'll go and look for Nan", said Maurice; and trotted off, thinking, "One lie's as good as another. She's avoiding me as though I were the plague. Wish I'd never invited her down here. Women are a blasted nuisance in the hunting field."

All the same, what a picture Nan made on that big black horse.

§ 2

Hounds had disappeared into the wood before Maurice found Nan again—halfway up the slope towards the cut-and-laid at the far edge of the trees.

"Where have you been hiding?" he asked as he rode up.

She gave him one look that he was to remember as long as he lived, but no answer. They heard a hound give tongue. He cocked a leg forward, pretended to tighten Flyaway's girth.

"I thought we rather liked each other", he said nonchalantly.

Nan drew the thong of her whip through her fingers; then her face flamed under the veil, and she looked at him again.

"If we do", she said slowly, "the sooner we forget about it the better."

"But supposing we can't?" His face too was flaming.

"Maurice—we must."

She averted her face; edged Rapsallion up the slope; halted fifty yards from the hedge. Flyaway followed. Stupidly, Maurice thought, "She's quite right. I shall have to go back to Paris or something. Jolly romantic, though. Isn't there a poem about it? Our last ride together . . ."

A second hound and a third gave tongue. But the music was going away from them. The few riders who had followed them up the slope were turning back. Maurice heard one of them call, "He won't break this way with no wind"; and

another, "Let's make for that gap—not that it's much use—some damn fool's sure to head him".

Looking to the right of the gap he saw his mother. She lifted her whip. He had the impression that she wanted to speak to him. But his thoughts were with Nan again. Just for a second he saw her lounging on the divan in his studio.

"I'm always happy when I'm here", she was saying.

Then memories vanished; and he was only aware of what a figure she made in her bowler hat, her perfectly cut habit.

"I could make her love me", he knew. And, on that, imagination assailed him—till the hound music drove it away.

Hounds were on a hot scent. Hounds had turned, were coming their way again. He heard the huntsman's horse crashing through undergrowth. Black's ears and chestnut's were both cocked. From the far side of the hedge a whipper-in signalled them to keep back.

One twang of the horn. One last burst of music. A voice bellowing, "Forrard". And Rapsallion was away; Rapsallion had gathered his hocks under him . . .

"Our last ride together", thought Maurice, giving Flyaway his head; but, as he followed Nan at that first cut-and-laid, he seemed to hear himself saying, "When I'm grown up, I'll give you all a lead"; and John saying, "Shut up, you little swank-pot"; and Nan saying, "Don't take any notice of him. It's just because he's jealous".

Jealous?

He'd give John something to be jealous about before he was through . . .

§ 3

Nan had forgotten the ditch on the far side of the first cut-and-laid. But Rapsallion remembered it; took off and landed like a bird. Hounds, running almost mute, were already halfway down the ridge and furrow.

She glanced to her left; saw other horses leaping, two crowds stampeding for two open gates. She glanced to her right; saw Charlotte on her roan. Charlotte seemed to be signalling. She kept looking at one, pointing up the hill with her whip.

"Wonder what she's doing that for", thought Nan vaguely; but the thud of Flyaway's hoofs just behind her drove the thought away.

A few more strides—and Maurice was leading her by a couple of lengths. Hounds streamed up and over the next fence. Maurice turned in his saddle. He shouted something; pulled wide. She thought of taking her own line; thought better of it; saw Maurice's legs close; saw him tap Flyaway with his whip; sat still as Rapscaillon gathered himself under her, as his forehead lifted . . .

They were in mid air. They were safely over those two ditches. But the chestnut had half-pecked. She heard Maurice's, "Steady, you brute", as she galloped on—only to be overtaken again.

For Maurice was all steamed up by then—ready to break his own neck or anyone else's.

"Show Nan how I can ride", he thought. "Show the whole field how I can ride. Give 'em all a lead."

Ahead, rose timber. He saw hounds stream under it; saw the huntsman take a pull; clear the post-and-rails in style.

Fifty yards to his right rode the whipper-in who had given the "Gone away". He, too, cleared the timber. But the chestnut never would. Not at this pace. Maurice gave him the curb, once, twice and again; leaned forward; saw the top rail below his knees; heard it smash; landed; galloped away, whooping.

Nan—he just realised—was still following him.

They were in a long valley now. Flat fields. Easier fences. Hounds had vanished beyond the next one. By jingo, they were running like a railway train. They were losing whipper-in and huntsman.

Maurice's dark eyes glanced left; glanced right. Only Nan up with him. He glanced over his shoulder. She still followed. Two, three, four more were coming over by that rail he'd broken. His mother was nowhere to be seen.

The knowledge that he and Nan led the field roused all the egoist, all the would-be lover and something of the poet in him. Some sportsman this chap, Maurice Carteret. After all it wasn't his fault that he'd fallen in love with his brother's wife.

And how well he meant to behave. Just this one ride—and he'd never see her again.

A real sportsman, this Maurice Carteret. Strong character, too. Could resist temptation. A fellow like John didn't even know the meaning of temptation. Just a fish. No red blood in him . . .

Flyaway took the next fence, another cut-and-laid, in his stride. Whooping again as he saw hounds, Maurice hared on.

Another fence. Over we go. Here comes Nan after us.

Blackthorn ahead now. High. But plenty of thin stuff. Nothing to worry about. Or is there? Doesn't one remember . . .

But Maurice was still too steamed up to remember the line hounds were taking. And no instinct for a country warned him—as it had once warned Rupert Whittinghame—of water.

He hardly realised that the valley narrowed. He never saw that wisp of snipe flash white from the marsh grass. Whipper-in and huntsman were still leading him. Only by a few lengths, though. And Nan must be gaining on him. He could hear Rapsallion's hoofs thudding . . . squelching.

"Bit soft here", he thought.

Clods were flying from the hoofs ahead. Suddenly the huntsman's white breeches, his scarlet coat, his velvet cap disappeared from view.

Whip up, reins bunched in his left hand, Maurice went for the place he had picked; dug spurs home; felt hat swept from forehead, knew that the hunting string had broken; and charged through; saw the brook.

Dammit, he'd forgotten about the brook.

Could he get Flyaway across Abercorn Brook? Blast it, he'd make Flyaway leap Abercorn Brook? He'd show Nan; he'd show the whole field the kind of horseman he was.

Hounds were across. The huntsman would go for it. There he went, and the whipper-in after him. Hounds looked as though they might be at fault. They were at fault—checking. But he couldn't pull up now.

Four more strides. Three more strides. Was this Nan? Level with him? Racing him? He'd show her. He'd show everybody . . .

Hatless, spurs home again, reins loose, Maurice felt the chestnut take off from that poached bank ; saw the stakes he had just avoided, those other stakes on the landing side . . .

Those stakes . . .

Rapscallion swerving . . .

Rapscallion over . . .

That body catapulted from the saddle . . .

That awful thud . . .

Christ !

§ 4

Two minutes later Charlotte, taking the easier line down the valley, saw hounds at their noses near the edge of Black Wood. But, even as she would have pulled to a hand canter, that other sight flashed on her eyes, and she was galloping again, madly, through a sudden storm-spatter for the bridge.

Blown rain drops blinded her as the roan's hoofs shook the trestles of the bridge. Wrenching hard to her right, wrenching Loosebit to his haunches, throwing herself from the saddle, she seemed to hear a voice, "Why don't you have those stakes done away with ? They'll kill somebody one of these days".

Then she was floundering through mud and water to where those two figures—Maurice and the huntsman—stooped over Nan. But even as Charlotte reached those two figures it came to her, horribly, that there was no hope and that Nan knew this as well as she.

Nan's very eyes told one that, when one knelt by her ; when Maurice lifted her head a little higher—the transfixed body, he had not dared lift—from the green slime.

"Harry", muttered Nan, "Harry" ; and her eyes closed for a second, opened again as that thin trickle of scarlet oozed from one corner of her mouth.

"Granny", she said next. "You ?"

"Yes, my dear."

"Where's—where's Maurice ?"

One realised that she could not see Maurice because he was behind her ; but she seemed to hear his :

"I'm here, Nan".

And suddenly, strangely, one recognised that movement of the reddening mouth for a smile.

"It—doesn't—hurt—too much", smiled Nan through another trickle of blood. "I—can—just—stick it. It's—it's so much—better this way—you see. You—do—see—that—don't you—my—my . . ."

Then Nan muttered again, just once, "Harry"; and the breath whistled through her clenching teeth; and her body heaved against the stake; and a great choking gush of scarlet tore her mouth open for the last time . . .

§ 5

Dimly Charlotte heard Maurice say, "O my God, she's dead. I've killed her. John will never forgive me".

Very dimly she heard herself answer, "My fault as much as yours. I should have warned her".

And after that everything went dim—a long succession of horrors seen through the lash of rain and increasing darkness—till she found herself riding through her own lodge gates, till she found herself looking down at John.

"I was just beginning to get anxious", laughed John; but the lodge lamps showed him her face, the mud, the blood on her habit; and all he said, as she slipped from her horse, was, "Tell me".

So she told him; and he listened, uttering never a word, till she finished, "I left Maurice with her. At the hospital. Of course I might have telephoned. But there was nothing to be done. And I preferred to tell you myself. It was really my doing, you see. I ought to have told her not to put Rapsallion at water".

Even then, he seemed incapable of speech; and she had to continue, "You'll want to see her. I'll get the car out. I'll drive you there", before he pulled himself together, before he could say, "I can't see that it was your fault".

He said that again when they were about a mile from the cottage hospital. But with his brother, who was waiting in the porch, he could not bring himself to speak; and when he came back to them, that one look of sheer hatred in his

brown eyes seemed to tell Charlotte that he would never quite forgive Maurice for what had happened that day.

"You mustn't be unreasonable", she wanted to say. "I'm every bit as much to blame as he is."

Only how could one say that? How could one say anything to this John, pleading again, very late that night, "Don't go yet, mother. Stay up a bit longer. Let me go on talking to you. I'll . . . I'll get over this before I've finished. But I can't manage it alone. Not yet awhile"?

It was four o'clock in the morning before they put out the lamps, and made to light the last two candles on the hall table.

"I'm a selfish beast to have kept you up like this", he said, laying a hand on her shoulder. "You must be absolutely worn out. But there's—there's nobody else I can talk to now—now that Nan's gone."

She heard herself whisper, "There's Johnny"; heard him whisper back, "Yes. That's true. There is Johnny. You'll help me to look after him, won't you?"

Then she was in his arms, and he was kissing her, almost as a lover might have kissed her; urging her:

"Don't cry, mother. It isn't like you".

Smiling through her tears, she said, "If it comes to that, it isn't like you to cry either, darling".

That was the very first time Charlotte Carteret had ever called one of her children, "darling", in her whole life.

■

BOOK THREE

PRESENT DAY

■

CHAPTER SIXTY-FIVE

§ 1

HERBERT CARTERET opened the bottom drawer of his office desk ; took out a box of cigars, and passed it over to John, who shook his head, and produced a pipe from the side pocket of his short black jacket.

Herbert said, "All the same, you'll never be a Baldwin" ; and laughed, before he went on :

"I suppose you wouldn't ask for the Chiltern Hundreds, even to oblige your old uncle".

John, who had just taken to spectacles, polished them—a habit he found useful on difficult occasions.

"That", he smiled, "would be asking a little too much."

"I was afraid so." Herbert stroked a moustache which the years had turned almost white. "But don't forget that I am rather old, getting on towards seventy, and that if I were to go the same way George did, you'd simply have to take in a partner or give up your seat."

"Unless I gave up practising."

"Dash it all, John, surely you wouldn't give up four thousand a year?"

A ring at the telephone disturbed them. Herbert, resuming his usual breezy voice, plunged into a longish argument with the client at the other end of the wire. John's eyes wandered to the big calendar hanging on the opposite wall.

Queer—how quickly the years went by one. More than seven already since he had lost Nan.

His partner continued to argue, "I'm afraid you can't possibly do that, Mr. Greatorex. However badly a wife may have behaved, judges are most loth to deny access . . ."

Listening attentively, John thought, "George might have understood. Herbert never will. The fleshpots for him".

All the same—said the philosopher in John—it took all sorts to make a world.

Mr. Greator, having received a disquieting lecture on the law of custody, made an appointment for next day, and hung up.

"The House of Commons", went on Herbert, eyeing the ash on his cigar, "may be all right for a barrister. But a solicitor's first duty is to his clients. And after all I'm not a young man any more. I want to take things a bit easy."

"Then why don't you?"

"My dear chap!"

"You're well enough off, you know", said John smiling.

"But—the business."

"Even you can't have it both ways, uncle."

"We both could—if only you weren't so obstinate."

"I doubt it. Say we did take in a partner——"

"We might take in two or three. We might amalgamate with——"

"Those people. No, thank you"; and John, rising, walked to the window; looked down into the street where Herbert's chauffeur was already waiting, while his uncle thought, "His father to the very life".

"I wish you'd state what your objections really are", he continued; and John, turning, came back to the desk.

This row—if row it must be—had been brewing for the past year. Best, therefore, to put his own position quite clearly. He did so—and Herbert's eyes nearly popped out of his head as he ejaculated between cigar puffs:

"You mean to say that if I wanted to retire you'd wind up the firm and devote your whole time to what you call your public duties?"

"Precisely. After all, why shouldn't I? My own wants are simple enough. My son's future is provided for. My mother is provided for. And there are plenty of other solicitors in London."

"Well, I'll be blowed."

Sheer surprise struck Herbert speechless. His cigar went out, and he forgot to relight it.

"I'm sorry if I've upset you", concluded John. "But you

had to know eventually. Please don't think me ungrateful. It was jolly decent of you and Uncle George to take me into the firm originally. That's why—as long as you carry on here—I shall. But I shan't carry on a minute longer than that; because after all money isn't everything."

"Perhaps not", said Herbert dully; and, alone a few minutes later, he went to the window, waiting there till he saw John cross the street on his way to Westminster—he, too, thinking of those seven years and more which had gone by since Nan's death.

"Changed him", thought John's uncle still dully. "Or would he have gone the same way even if she had lived? Possibly. There are chaps like that. Cranky. I suppose he thinks he does quite a lot of good walking in and out of his lobbies. Perhaps he does, for all I know."

Then he went to his safe, opened it and inspected his investment register, though he knew its contents by heart.

"John's right about one thing", he brooded. "I could take things more easily. As far as that goes, I could retire and live in that new country house of mine."

But did he want to give up his town house? Did he really want to retire? Was his golf good enough?

He didn't particularly like golf. What he really liked was making money.

So why shouldn't he go on making it? After all, a man had to fulfil himself. And life was an ironical business.

"More than ironical", decided Herbert Carteret, stepping into his car, "because when Louisa and I are gone, John's son Johnny will get the whole packet. Perhaps John'll think just a little better of me—then."

§ 2

Meanwhile John went slowly towards the House of Commons—trying, as usual, to be fair.

There was a lot in Herbert's argument. From the purely business point of view, they should take in partners or amalgamate with some other firm. One ought not to despise money . . . just because one had enough of it.

Nevertheless, one did. Or rather, one despised people who made it their standard of values . . . while their fellow men and women had barely enough to eat.

"Unfair world", mused Sir John Carteret, M.P. "Always has been and always will be. Still, we do improve."

The thought comforted him. He, at any rate, was doing his best to improve the chances of his fellow men and women. Not that any single individual could do very much.

So thinking he crossed Parliament Square. The policeman on duty in the courtyard saluted him. Big Ben chimed six as he strolled out on to the Terrace and chose a lonely seat.

He had intended—having acquired something of that genius for compromise which is the essence of England—to reconsider his position with Herbert. But the sight of a fellow member entertaining two young women brought his mind back to Nan.

What a lot of water had flowed along this embankment since the moment when he had stood, still incapable of tears, in that bare room at the Cottage Hospital. How rarely he ever thought of Nan nowadays.

Yet he had never loved any other woman. And the chances were he never would.

"Can't see myself getting married again", he brooded. "Too big a risk. And as for the other thing . . . why should I, as long as I've got Johnny to look after, and mother, and my work?"

All the same—lighting himself another pipe—Sir John Carteret, M.P., knew that the real reason for his eschewal of love lay deeper, was more complex. And, because his whole nature revolted from depths and complexities, his mind flashed him another scene out of the past.

Nan had been dead three days. He was back in Royal Avenue, doing his duty as her sole executor, thinking how orderly she had always been, how careful about money matters, as he looked through her cash book, her pass book . . .

Until, abruptly, that one letter in the bank clerk's tidy handwriting struck him between the eyes.

"M. Carteret", the clerk had written. "£25." And,

flipping on through the pass book, he had found half a dozen similar entries.

Even then, however, the truth seemed incredible. He only discovered confirmation of it when he opened that mauve leather jewelbox with the tiny brass key that had been on Nan when she died.

Sitting there—in June sunshine on the terrace of the House of Commons seven and more years afterwards—John could still see, could almost feel, the padded silk lining of that jewelbox and . . . Maurice's letters, Maurice's I.O.U.'s.

He could even remember himself thinking, "But she's lent him hundreds, hundreds", and the horrible, the incredible suspicion with which he had begun—hating himself for not having the strength of mind to tear them up—to read Maurice's letters.

Why had Nan never shown him one of these letters? Why had she never told him about any of her visits to Maurice's studio? Had she and Maurice . . .

No. No. That was impossible. The very letters proved it. After all, they were harmless enough—just requests for another meeting, or for more money.

But why had Nan never refused the money? She had always set her face against lending. And why should Maurice have gone to her, instead of coming to him, John?

The fellow member and the two ladies he was escorting left their table, went back into the House. A little cloud blew across the sun. Suddenly chilled, John rose and began to pace the terrace.

"Why go over all that again?" he asked himself. "It doesn't matter any more. It doesn't hurt any more."

Yet how it had hurt—at the time and for years afterwards—to imagine that Nan might have been . . . cheating.

"Hard of you?" mused his sense of fairness. "Unjust of you? After all, it was her own money. She could do what she liked with it."

Yet why had Nan made that particular use of her money? Why had she been so furtive about her visits to Maurice?

Even at all this interval of time, one didn't know—and one never would know—because the only person in the world who

could have told one was Maurice—and all these years one's whole nature had revolted from any but casual contacts with the man, one's own brother, who had been responsible for her death.

§ 3

Rain drops, spattering the flagstones, drove John indoors. He entered the Chamber, bowed to the Speaker, and took his back bench. The man next to him—also one of the few National Labourites—smiled and whispered, "Dull as ditch-water. We've got too big a majority. Much better fun when the old party was in opposition. I'm not sure I approve of this token payment to America. How do you feel about it?"

John said, "I suppose it's all right. Anyway a couple of millions won't kill us".

His thoughts, however, were still with Maurice.

In justice to Nan he ought to have tackled Maurice. In justice to Johnny—who would eventually inherit Nan's few thousands—that money should have been paid back to her estate before he let Maurice have his own capital.

Why hadn't Maurice realised that? Why had he let the whole thing slide, for a month, for two months, for three months . . . till it was too late to tackle him any more? After all Maurice had never been a moneygrubber. One had to give him that.

"Perhaps he didn't have enough opportunity", suggested John's sense of fairness; but his sense of justice demurred, "If he'd have been honest, he would have made a clean breast of the thing when you handed him over his capital."

And once again—while he listened with half an ear to the debate—his mind reverted to the woman who had been his wife; telling him—very clearly and for the first time in these seven years of his widowerhood—one exact truth about their relationship.

"Realise this one thing", said that voice which was his inmost mind, "however well, however faithfully, she may have done her duty by you, you and she were essentially incompatible. At the best, you could only have learned to tolerate each other."

Nor could John Carteret doubt that truth as his eyes wandered up from these brown benches to that empty gallery above them. Because, as little as Nan had understood that his law work sometimes meant more to him than just moneymaking, so little would she have understood his affection for this dull, prosaic place.

The House of Commons, for a backbencher like himself, held few or no excitements. At best, one was a mere cog in the party machine. Moreover it entailed considerable work to retain even one's modest cogdom in this machine—constant visits to one's constituency, attendance at innumerable meetings, streams of correspondence, most of it futile.

All the same—and increasingly throughout the four years of his membership—he had learned to regard this place as his real home.

"I wonder why", he thought; then, answering his own question with just a gleam of that humour which was slowly coming to birth in him, "Probably because I'm such a dull, prosaic person myself."

§ 4

All the same there was no prosaic look in John's brown eyes when he went to the library, some three quarters of an hour before the time he had fixed for his little family dinner party, and sat down to begin his bi-weekly letter to Johnny:

"My dear son, Thank you for your long epistle. I am glad you enjoy cricket; but would you mind spelling it with a 'c', just to oblige your father".

For hadn't he made that very same mistake, writing to his own father from that very same Hendersons; and hadn't his own father written him that identical reproof?

And wasn't the real romance of life, the real purpose of life, continuity?

"It must be that for the majority", brooded John. "Though perhaps it's different for artists. They have to be individualists."

Surely, however, that only applied to great artists. Not to second-rate ones like . . .

. . . Like Maurice.

CHAPTER SIXTY-SIX

§ 1

AT about the same time John left the Chamber for the House of Commons library, another member of the family was also thinking about Maurice.

"Won't he be there tonight?" asked Mercy; and Philip—lounging on the sofa of their hotel sitting room in a flowered dressing gown, which even his young wife's assumption of complete Englishry could not refrain from calling his "bath robe"—replied instantly:

"No, darling. He will not".

"Why?" continued Mercy Carteret.

"That", said Philip, "is rather a long tale. If I were you, I shouldn't worry my head about it."

"You mean, John and Maurice don't like each other. But that's terrible. Maurice is so nice, too."

"Oh, he's all right."

Philip's mouth closed in the way his young wife was beginning to know so well. He picked up his evening paper. Mercy walked to the table, and re-arranged the roses Maurice had just sent her.

"If you won't tell me", she threatened, "I shall ask your mother."

"You won't get much change out of her."

Philip chuckled. He passed a hand over his head, which had grown just a little bald.

"Angel", he began, "don't be so American."

"American."

"Otherwise curious."

"Pig. I wish I'd never married an Englishman. If you weren't so obstinate, you'd have taken out your papers before you married me. I'm beginning to wish I'd made you."

"You can't *make* me do anything."

"Oh, can't I?"

She plumped herself down beside him on the sofa.

"Can't I?" she repeated after a few breathless moments.

"Leave me alone, you little vamp."

She rose, and looked down on him. The pupils of her blue eyes were still a little dilated; but the squarish mouth with the slightly prominent teeth belied the feigned passion, laughing:

"O Philip, you are funny. You always were. I just don't know what I'd have done about you if it hadn't been for the depression".

And she began to mimic his proposal, "Mercy, there's something I've wanted to tell you for a long time. But of course I couldn't".

"Shut up", he growled.

But his young wife only laughed on, "Of course he couldn't, the silly sweetheart. Because Mercy Vansuythen had millions of dollars, and he was only on a salary".

"Will you shut up!"

"What will you do if I don't?"

"Beat you." Philip's eyes, almost the same blue as her own, twinkled. "Ruffle that corn-coloured head of yours. Write and tell Aurelia that you're utterly impossible. *And* get a divorce."

They were in each other's arms again by then. For two years had only heightened the romance of their marriage; and this was their first holiday outside America—where a man in Philip's position could never quite escape from his responsibilities.

§ 2

Philip Carteret, still very much the dandy, could not help considering that position as he made his careful toilet—and the more he considered it, the more astounding it seemed.

Four years ago, he had been merely in charge of a minor Mansfield concern—the T.M. Aviation Corporation—on a salary of ten thousand dollars a year. Today, he and Dwight

were equal shareholders in Mansfield Utilities, with the "old man" threatening to retire.

"Just luck?" mused Philip. "Just because I wasn't as big an optimist as they were?"

Or had it been . . . just love?

The question puzzled him. For a moment he looked back; saw himself riding through a green valley towards a house with orange sunblinds, on whose lawns young folk were playing tennis, in whose new swimming pool young folk were diving. With him rode his sister, Elizabeth.

"You can't fool me", Elizabeth was saying. "You've been in love with Mercy ever since she went to Bryn Mawr. And she isn't as rich as all that anyway. We none of us are. It's mostly on paper. I'm always telling Dwight so. But he won't believe me. Nobody will believe me. He simply laughs at me because I put everything I save into Liberty Loan. Why don't you?"

"Not me", Philip remembered himself saying. "I told mother, years ago, that I'd never be happy till I'd made a million dollars . . . And I'm breaking off here. I'm taking this nag back to the club. I don't want to meet all that mob of yours."

"Coward", he remembered Elizabeth saying. "You're just scared blue of meeting Mercy."

And of course she had been right.

He recollected, as he tied and re-tied his black tie, how angry he had been with her just because she was right; and galloping back to the club; and handing over his horse; and sitting on the verandah to drink a highball; and one of his own air-planes droning towards the new port across the clear September sky.

He recollected thinking that the sky was almost too clear; and going into a long reverie about variable-pitch airscrews and retractable undercarriages; and arguing with himself that there was no money in airplanes anyway; and trying to tell himself that he really wasn't miserable—when all the time he was so bally miserable that life didn't seem worth living any more; and making up his mind that he would never be happy as long as he lived in America; and that the best thing he could

do was to sell out all his stocks (not that they were worth much against the sort of money the Mansfields and the Vansuythens had) and go back and live in England.

"And the funny thing", he thought, his tie at last to his satisfaction, "is that I did sell out. Right at the very top, too."

But what blind instinct had made him "turn around"?

Some of those scenes, too, came back—with the most impossible celerity—while he was putting on his coat and waistcoat. He saw himself "home" (if one could call those two rooms "home") sitting down to write a letter to Charlotte, telling her what a pessimist Elizabeth was, how she put all her little savings into gilt-edged (Charlotte mightn't know what "Liberty Loan" meant), "So that she's only getting about two and a half per cent. interest".

He saw himself pausing in the middle of that letter; rising and going to the window; and staring out where the lights gleamed along the Schuylkill to wonder, "By gosh, what a packet one could make if Elizabeth, by some miracle, happened to be right".

Then he saw himself staring at Mercy's photograph, the one he had cut out of *The Spur*; and remembered himself thinking, "I suppose I'm crazy, but if I can't marry her I don't care if I do go broke", and getting a pencil and a piece of paper, and sitting down—his unfinished letter forgotten—to work out just how much a chap could make out of fifty thousand dollars if there were a slump, and if he "pyramided".

And after that—two or three days later, it must have been—he remembered meeting Mercy in her red and black runabout just outside City Hall; and how she had said, "You never come out to the house nowadays, and you weren't at Elizabeth's the other afternoon though she promised me you would be"; and how he had said, "I'm awfully sorry but I'm so busy, you know"; and the look she had given him just before she drove off; and finding himself in his broker's private office; and the way Buddy Flynn's eyebrows had gone up, almost till they met his untidy hair, as he said:

"Well, it's your money, Carteret, so if you ask me to make the market a present of the whole fifty thousand on the usual margin I can't stop you. Though, believe me, the idea of

selling any stock short—let alone leaders, as you want to—at the present moment gives me the jitters”.

“And within twenty-four hours of that”, mused Philip, “the market came down like a house of cards ; and I was making my fortune. Queer !”

CHAPTER SIXTY-SEVEN

§ 1

THE telephone in their sitting room rang while Philip was pinning his carnation. He heard Mercy say, "Yes, please. Bring Lady Carteret up"; and his heart gave one beat of happy anticipation.

"Nearly five years", he remembered, "since we last met."

Charlotte remembered that, too—and thought how curious it was that Philip should have married Mercy. As the page boy led her down the long shiplike corridor towards their suite, she could almost hear that first shriek of the escaping steam; could almost see Dwight in his shaggy fur coat, and the baby lying on Aurelia's bed, and John, her husband, running into the cabin.

How old would her husband be if he were still alive? Over seventy? How fast the years went by.

Chiding herself for the banality of that last thought, she followed the page into the room; and, as she entered, Mercy Carteret also had her memories—of Elizabeth's wedding day, and this tall woman with the shorn steel-gray hair radiant and young (though she hadn't seemed young to a six-year-old) in a long dove-gray dress and a black picture hat.

"Ought we to kiss?" Mercy asked herself; and aloud, "How do you do?"

The greeting sounded so stiff that Charlotte hesitated; then she put out both hands and her lips just touched Mercy's pale cheek.

"I should never have known you", said Charlotte; and added, smiling, "If you don't mind my saying so, you were a particularly plain child."

"Positively revolting", called Philip from the inner doorway. "But she's got over it all right, hasn't she?"

His mother snapped at him, "If you want my candid opinion, she's much too good-looking for you, my dear"; but a moment later they were in each other's arms.

"A bit inhibited?" Mercy asked herself. "Or just English? They are the most peculiar people."

All the same, she felt that she was going to like Charlotte, now asking after Aurelia, and Dwight, and her grandfather.

Mercy said, "Oh, they're fine, thank you. And Elizabeth sent you all sorts of messages. She was simply crazy to come over, but Dwight said he'd be lonely".

Then the talk turned on Elizabeth's eldest daughter, and Philip chuckled: "She's got her own reasons for not coming to Europe. His name's Flynn, and he's a broker. Nothing against him except that he's not too keen on brushing his hair. But won't it be fun if Honoria marries him and they make you a great-grandmother before you're sixty. You're not that yet, are you?"

Charlotte retorted, with mock dignity, "Mercy doesn't seem to have improved your manners". But her heart warmed to the chaff.

The older she grew—she was finding—the more she appreciated the company of the young. Most of her contemporaries disagreed with her. Largely, she imagined, because they were jealous. And of course one couldn't help being just a little jealous of youth.

"Enviably creature", she thought, surveying this new daughter-in-law from the tips of her smart American shoes to the plait coiled round her naturally blond hair. "And yet, I'm not sure that I would change places with you."

For in these last seven years she had come to great happiness. And this—it seemed to Philip—showed in her every word, her every gesture. So that he could not help remembering a chance phrase in one of John's letters, "You would laugh to see mother with that kid of mine. Anyone would think it was her own".

Presently—when he had insisted they must have "just one cocktail"—she turned the talk on Johnny to say, "He's playing in some match tomorrow, so John and I have to go down.

You and Mercy must come with us. Mother will be so excited to see you”.

“You don’t mean to say Gertrude’s still going strong?”

“Stronger than ever”, smiled Charlotte.

“My sainted aunt. Why, if Honoria does marry Buddy and they have issue—as John would say—she’ll be a great-great-grandmother.”

At which precise moment the telephone rang again; and Philip said, “Half a moment, old chap”, before he put his hand over the receiver.

“It’s Maurice”, he went on, looking at his mother. “He says he was just passing and can he come up for a moment.”

Charlotte looked at the clock on the ornate mantelpiece. Mercy noticed that the long lashes flickered just once over her big blue eyes before she answered:

“Why not? We haven’t got to be at the House of Commons for another half-hour”.

§ 2

No page ushered Maurice into the sitting room. He opened without knocking; stood in the doorway for a moment—the same debonair figure Mercy recollected in the lecture hall at Bryn Mawr, where he had discoursed for the best part of an hour on, “Art—the Handmaiden of Commerce”, while sophomoric hearts fluttered at his every word.

“He’s too good-looking to be true”, Mercy remembered the girl next to her whispering. “He ought to be in the movies.”

The judgment—it seemed to her—was still tolerably correct. Yet for all his extravagant good looks, for all the ease of his approach and of his opening words, her shrewdness perceived an alteration, possibly a deterioration.

And this deterioration in Maurice was even clearer to Philip than to his wife.

He had acquired the habit of judging men. This one—his judgment told him—could not be numbered among the reliables. He remembered a spoken phrase of John’s, “It’s a pity about me and Maurice. I try not to be prejudiced, but I never quite know where I am with him”. And somehow or other he could

not help resenting the way Maurice kissed Mercy, the way he held both her hands.

"Going on to a party, I see", he said. "With the head of the family, I presume. John and I don't hit off too well. I perceive Philip has already told you that. Anyway it's quite an open secret. Isn't it, mother?"

"I've never known you to keep one", retorted Charlotte.

"That only shows how little you really know me, darling." And her, too, he kissed, continuing:

"Now, tell me, Mrs. Carteret. How do you like London? What do you think of our policemen?"

"I thought it was very charming of you to send me those flowers", said Mercy, indicating the roses.

"I *am* charming. That's one of my main troubles."

"Although he's such a bounder", intervened Charlotte.

"All great men bound. Julius Cæsar did. Napoleon did. Mussolini does."

Despite the apparent bravura of this parry, however, it seemed to Mercy that Maurice was a little hurt; and to Philip that his mother still cherished a great affection for this wayward brother of his.

And after all why not?

Maurice might be "a bit of a Bohemian". But then artists—in Philip's imagination—were different from ordinary people. Maurice certainly had no money sense. Look at the way he'd run through his capital. Look at the way he'd lived—with an English valet, if you please—during that lecture tour in America. Still, he had made a reputation for himself. His poster pictures commanded good prices. Neither—as far as one knew—had he ever done anything to disgrace the name.

"Drink", he said, in answer to Mercy's invitation. "No, I don't think so. I very rarely touch it before meals. I'm really not as black as some people paint me. Am I"—he turned to Charlotte—"darling?"

"Not quite", said Charlotte.

"And at the moment, in case it interests you, I'm almost preternaturally solvent."

"Thanks to your work or your bookmaker?"

"Both", grinned Maurice, and felt in the hip pocket of his razor-edge creased gray trousers for his cigarette case, before he went on :

"What I really looked in for, Philip, was to know whether you and Mercy have anything on for Monday night. I'm throwing a little party at my studio. It doesn't begin, officially, till half-past ten. So we might do a little dinner first. There's a new place just open. The Hasta la Vista. Spanish, as the name implies. Great country, Spain. I've spent my last three holidays there. Are you staying up, mother? If so, you'd better come too.

"You needn't come back to the orgy at the studio", he concluded with another grin; and—all three having accepted his invitation—lounged off.

■

CHAPTER SIXTY-EIGHT

§ 1

"He isn't vicious. He's only silly", mused Charlotte as her youngest son's beautifully tailored shoulders disappeared through the doorway. "And he's the most generous soul in the world."

Yet how difficult to go on loving even one's own son when one could no longer respect him; when his whole attitude towards life was so utterly different from one's own!

"I can't help it", continued her musing, "if I don't approve of people who are hardly ever out of debt, who gamble for more than they can afford, who think marriage is a bad joke and family life something to be sneered at."

All the same, was that quite true of Maurice? Wasn't he just a creature of his period and environment? Hadn't John's prejudices—though he so rarely vented them—affected one's own?

Meanwhile Mercy went to put on her opera cloak; and Philip, having finished his cocktail, unwrapped a framed picture of Elizabeth and her three girls.

"She thought you'd like it for the Manor", he said. "You wouldn't think she was getting on for forty, eh?"

"No. She looks almost as young as they do."

"Oh, and Elizabeth said I was to tell you that you really must come over this winter."

"And lose six weeks' hunting?"

"There's plenty of hunting."

"But the fare's so expensive. Besides——"

"You don't want to leave John and Johnny."

"How did you know that?"

Philip laughed. "We big business men", he began, "have to make a study of human nature." Then, with a touch of

seriousness, he continued, "Elizabeth and I have only ourselves to thank. She wanted to marry Dwight and I wanted to make my fortune. One can't have everything in this world".

"Does that mean you miss me sometimes?"

"You—and England." Philip laughed again. "Sentimental of us, isn't it?"

Charlotte hesitated; then she put a hand on his arm.

"There's all the difference between sentiment and sentimentality", she said; and, quizzing him, "I'm glad money-making hasn't spoilt you, my dear. Are you really as rich as Aurelia's always telling me in her letters?"

"Grandfather says", interrupted Mercy re-entering to overhear the question, "that we shan't any of us have a dollar by the time Roosevelt's finished with us."

Philip laughed once more as he retorted:

"You can talk politics with John, honey. I don't pretend to understand them. All I know is how many beans make five".

§ 2

Mercy's last memories of John seemed far less clear than her memory of Maurice. All she could conjure up, as their taxi rolled along the Embankment, was a rather plain, slightly pathetic, speechless figure, of whom her mother had said:

"He only lost his wife a few months ago. She was killed in a hunting accident. So you can't expect him to be very lively".

"Nineteen twenty-six, that must have been", she decided. "So I expect he's got over it by this time."

Aloud she asked, looking across the river, "O Philip, what's that building?"

"That", said Philip, "is London's City Hall. I hope you approve of it. Facing us, beyond those disgusting American traffic lights, you will observe, first, the imposing tower of Big Ben, secondly——"

"As if", she interrupted, "I didn't know."

All the same, Westminster impressed her. Despite all her modern sophistication, she had a feeling for beauty, a love for tradition. So that she found it a little difficult to understand

Philip's mocking, "This is where Eton, Harrow and Winchester, ably assisted by our Board Schools"—("We don't call them that any more", interrupted Charlotte)—"mismanage the British Empire".

She was more than a little puzzled, too, at the apparent coldness of the meeting between Philip and John, who came slowly out from a big gray archway as their taxi drew to a standstill. John—she couldn't help feeling—should at least have fetched them from their hotel.

"Sorry I'm not dressed", he said, greetings over; and, secretly comparing him with her husband, Mercy thought he looked ten years the elder instead of merely two.

Of herself, though his manners were irreproachable, he took very little notice. Her sensitivities informed her that he had no interest in women. But she realised, before she had been in their company three minutes, the extraordinary affection between him and his mother.

What she could not realise was the shock John had experienced at the first sight of Philip's face, which brought back to him, willy nilly, all those first months of his bereavement, temporarily forgotten while he was writing to his son.

It had been Charlotte's suggestion—John remembered as he led his little party to one of the private dining rooms—that he should take six weeks' holiday from the office and spend a month of them with Philip in Philadelphia. And it was to Philip—only seen once since then—that he had opened his heart.

"I don't believe Nan ever really cared for me", he recollected himself saying. "It's absolutely filthy of me—and I haven't anything at all to go on—but I can't get it out of my head that she and Maurice were in love with each other, or at any rate half in love with each other."

What a state he must have been in to let confession—even to his own brother—go as far as that.

§ 3

With dinner on the table, John's seven-year-old memories receded. Halfway through, a division bell rang, and he had

to go to his lobby. On his return his new sister-in-law began to question him about parliamentary procedure. Answering, he thought, vaguely: "She's not unattractive and she seems rather intelligent. I hope she's making Philip happy".

Then Philip said, "It all sounds rather dreary to me. What on earth made you take it up, old chap? And if you had to be a politician, why couldn't you be a liberal or a conservative?" ; and for half an hour John Carteret—inhibitions forgotten—spoke of the faith that was in him, while Charlotte listened, very proud of him, yet ever so slightly afraid.

"I'm not a bolshie", he ended. "I'm not even a socialist. But I do feel that"—he turned to Philip—"the industrial system as you have it in America is out of date ; that it has to be transformed, gradually if you like, into something more human."

And when Philip, more impressed than he was willing to admit, interrupted, "That all sounds very nice, but I'm a practical man, and, as an employer of labour, what I'd like to know is how you're going to set about it", he said, with a curious note of authority in his voice :

"My dear chap, we are setting about it. Every other piece of legislation we put through is an attempt—muddleheaded if you like but at least sincere—to improve the condition of the masses and to curtail privilege. Though my own idea"—John hesitated—"is larger. What I'm working for is some general form of industrial co-partnership".

On which Charlotte intervened, "Hadn't you better keep that for your constituents, dear? We came to hear a debate, not a monologue"; and her eldest son, excusing himself with what seemed to Mercy a very British, "Sorry if I've been gassing too much", led them to their seats in the Strangers' Gallery ; from which she and Philip returned to their hotel, and supper, and a little dancing together—a pastime they both adored.

"But none of your late nights", admonished Philip, "because we've got to be up early tomorrow."

"Early!" scoffed Mercy. "Why—they're not calling for us till ten o'clock."

§ 4

It was a quarter-past ten—with Mercy and Philip already looking at their watches—before John drove his modest Siddeley into the courtyard of their hotel.

"My fault", said Charlotte, seated beside him. "I kept him waiting. Your Uncle Herbert and your Aunt Louisa send you both their kindest regards and hope you will dine with them on Wednesday."

John said, "Jump in, or we'll be late".

The invention of the selfchanging gear box had increased his fondness for motoring. But he never drove fast, distrusting his artificial leg in case of an emergency. Charlotte chaffed him about this as they filtered their way through the traffic of town.

"We can't all be thrusters", he chaffed back—and again Mercy was aware of the peculiar intimacy between the two.

This morning she found John a little more attractive. Intuition informed her that he was a "solid person", and that he "had his feet on the ground". She could easily imagine him doing the same kind of heroic deed his father had done for Dwight.

All the more curious, therefore, that there should be a feud—if it really were a feud—between him and Maurice.

"I wonder how it started", she thought; but forgot all about the quarrel—if it really were a quarrel—between her two brothers-in-law, as they made outer London and the first of the countryside beyond.

An hour took them twenty miles. The holiday mood was on all of them. Chaff grew general. She began to feel at home with "Philip's family". Maybe they weren't so unlike her own. Maybe most families were alike, whatever their nationality.

She said this, a little diffidently, in the middle of a jocular argument between John and Philip which had begun with Philip's statement, "I've been thinking over that debate we heard last night. It seems to me you people in England are so keen on social reform and all that sort of thing, you've quite forgotten there may be another war."

"You're so weak you're inviting every one to have a cut at you", continued Philip, having dismissed his wife's contention with a curt, "You can't put war to a universal family plebiscite, and even if you did, I don't believe that would stop it".

On which John, although he disputed the mere possibility of another world conflict, could not help feeling that Philip had a certain amount of right on his side.

"What do you feel about it, mother?" he asked.

But Charlotte rode him off with a quiet, "I came out to enjoy myself, not to discuss international situations"; and Philip said, "Hear, hear. The trouble with our John is that he's getting altogether too much the politician. Let's talk about Johnny's cricket. Is he in the first eleven yet?"

"Hardly at his age", laughed Charlotte; and John said, "He's in the second eleven, though. They gave him his colours at the beginning of this term"; and Philip, "So granny lets the second eleven wear colours nowadays".

After that, they talked Hendersons until—just as John changed gear halfway up a hill—a low green car, driven headlong by a young man with his flaxen head bare to the sun, roared by them; and as that young man lifted a hand from his wheel Charlotte and John both recognised him for Maurice.

§ 5

The green sports car carried a passenger to whom Maurice said:

"Who was that? Dash it, you ought to have recognised him. He was there in your time . . . Yes. My respected elder brother. The noble baronet. You've landed me into a bit of a mess, my friend. I'd never have suggested driving you down if I'd known he was going to turn up . . . Well, no. There isn't exactly a war on. We don't start heaving rocks the moment we see each other. Still, he's always happier when I'm not about, and I'm always happier when he isn't".

Andrew Prendergast, who was ten years older than his companion, said, "I always feel that family rows are a mistake. They never get one anywhere"; and Maurice, still with his foot nearly to the floorboards, fell to brooding:

"I don't see why I shouldn't have a cut at getting on better with the head of the family. After all he can't very well high hat me at granny's".

Aloud he remarked, "Oh, John's not a bad sort. And of course mother's a perfect ripper. Did you ever meet her?"

"I've hunted with her once", smiled Prendergast. "Or rather tried to. She hung me good and proper, I remember."

And :

"The reverend mother", laughed Maurice, "certainly does go like hell."

CHAPTER SIXTY-NINE

§ 1

"A SOUND knowledge of French", said Gertrude Henderson, standing between the desk and the blackboard, "can be considered, even in these degenerate days, an essential part of a gentleman's education. The next time you attempt to construe 'Colomba', Carteret, I shall hope to hear you do so with considerably more fluency."

Then she turned to Monsieur Lebrun's fourth (or was it fifth—her memory seemed to be failing a little) successor; and said, "I trust that there have been no more cases of insubordination".

Assured on which point, she departed, hardly needing the support of her rubber-shod stick; and Johnny Carteret, resuming his seat, whispered to his friend Jim Prendergast, "How long have we got before the break?"

§ 2

Meanwhile Jim Prendergast's father and Johnny Carteret's uncle had reached the outskirts of Middlehampton.

"I haven't been down since I left", said Maurice then. "Those bungaloid growths are pretty awful. But nobody seems to worry about what things look like nowadays. We're rather early. So what do you say to a quencher?"

Prendergast, slightly shattered by Maurice's driving, said, "Right".

Seaside Avenue—they perceived—had undergone little change. Here and there new shop fronts glittered with glass or chromium. But for the most part everything—as Maurice phrased it—was "definitely pre-war".

"Fashionable watering place", he scoffed. "Famed for its

educational establishments. Let's toddle along West Shore and have a squint at Miss Hornibrook's."

But, on the site of Elizabeth's old school, where the rails of the parade ended and the tamarisk hedge began, stood a vast block of "Sunshine Flats".

"Modern civilisation", scoffed Maurice. "The bon bourgeois in excelsis. They can't even leave the Downs alone. Look at those desirable residences."

Prendergast said, "Sorry you find them as bad as all that. I happen to be the architect of that estate".

"Sorry", grinned Maurice; and turned the car.

The Queen's Hotel, reached in ten minutes, wore its old stucco face, its identical iron balconies. Entering, however, they found a cocktail bar, complete with photographs of the "host and hostess", who taught both dancing and bridge.

"Rather a smart wench", said Maurice, and continued to examine the photographs while their drinks were being shaken. "But I don't think she could tempt me to spend a holiday in England. I've always been a bit of a wanderer, you know."

"I'd like an occasional holiday in France or Switzerland myself", agreed Prendergast. "But it's a bit difficult when one has kids."

"Yes, I suppose so." And, just for a second, there flashed through the imaginative brain of Maurice Carteret the thought, "I expect I'd have been different if I'd ever found a girl I could be really fond of. Say a girl like Nan".

The thought surprised him a little. It was so seldom, nowadays, that one even remembered Nan. Yet for a whole year after her death, the picture of her as she lay dying had never been quite erased from one's mind.

"So much—better this way. You do see—that—don't you—my—my . . ."

Her last words came back to him, incongruously, as he reached for his glass across the bar.

"Loved me?" he brooded. "Must have. But did I love her? Do I really love anybody—except myself?"

The question made him feel thoroughly uncomfortable. He had to break one of his rules and take a second pre-lunch

cocktail before he could rid himself of it. And conscience pricked him again as he remounted his three litre car, and turned off the Avenue down the half-mile of stucco-fronted houses, each in its own neat acre of ground, which ended at the school.

Now, by those white palings behind which trees and shrubs had grown tall with the years, he could see the whole school—the three red brick wings, the sloping glass that roofed the gymnasium, with “granny’s house” beyond.

How it seemed to have shrunk, when he compared it with his childish recollections. Yet how clear was every recollection. He could even remember Monsieur Lebrun’s eye on him as he had whispered to his neighbour on that hard bench, “*Ma grandmère me fait beaucoup rire toujours*”, and “Pontius Pilate’s” face frowning at him, “Did I hear you say ‘damn’, Carteret?”

“Bad lad even then”, he thought. “Still, I expect I’ll reform one of these days.”

So thinking, he drew brake at the low porch which led to the “private wing”.

§ 3

A gaunt parlourmaid answered Maurice’s ring; ushered him and Prendergast into the over-furnished drawing room. Automatically he took out his cigarette case; thought better of his intention just in time.

“I’m still a bit scared of your grandmother myself”, said Prendergast, noting the action. “What a woman, though. Pity there aren’t more like her.”

Then the bell rang again; and the parlourmaid ushered in John, Charlotte, Mercy—and Philip, who said, “Hallo, Maurice. So it was you who passed us on that hill”.

Explanations followed. John recognised Prendergast. They began to talk about their boys. Charlotte wandered to the little table on which the last picture taken of her father still stood in its massive silver frame.

“Who’s that?” asked Mercy at her elbow; and—her question answered—she said, “There’s quite a likeness. Do you remember him? I remember my father quite clearly. I

could even tell you what he wore the day Elizabeth was married."

"So could I", interrupted Maurice, joining them. "A gray suit, and a Panama hat, wasn't it?"

"Why, yes."

The entrance of Gertrude interrupted conversations. She expressed her surprise at seeing Maurice.

"The biggest handful we ever had", she said. "And now he's getting quite famous—according to the newspapers."

"Never believe what you read in the newspapers, granny", grinned Maurice. "I'm only a commercial artist, you know."

She eyed him shrewdly.

"You could have done better with your talent", she said. And again Maurice's conscience pricked him, taking away something of his fluency.

"One has to have money these days", he protested; and looked at John, whose greeting had been even more casual than Philip's. But John's eyes avoided his; and once again—it seemed to him—the image of Nan rose between them. Until, all of a sudden, the door opened once again; and he found himself looking across the room at Nan's son.

Presently he was saying, "Hallo, youngster. You don't remember me. I'm your Uncle Maurice".

"Don't I, just", answered Johnny Carteret. "You're the man that can draw dogs. I've got a dog now. But I'm not allowed to have him here so he lives at the Manor with granny. Have you come down to see me play cricket?"

"Obviously."

"He bowls." The statement was Jim Prendergast's, who had come in with Johnny. "I'm a bat."

The two boys—Maurice observed—were completely unselfconscious. Looking back on himself at their age, they struck him as almost abnormal in their poise. Prendergast, he wrote off as an ugly little devil. But Nan's son had Nan's blue eyes, and his brown hair had a touch of gold in it, and he carried himself well, as he moved away at John's call.

"You and granny can't take me out to lunch today", Maurice heard him tell his father. "We've got to lunch almost at once because otherwise we shan't be on the field in time. The

chaps from St. Catherine's are here already. They came in a charabanc."

Almost immediately the headmaster and the games master of St. Catherine's joined them ; a gong sounded, and Gertrude Henderson led the way to lunch.

CHAPTER SEVENTY

§ 1

CHARLOTTE realised that her mother—more and more wrapped up in the school, less and less curious about the family with every passing year—knew very little of the situation between John and Maurice. But the more she herself considered that situation, the more unpleasant, and the less necessary, it seemed.

Seated between Prendergast and the headmaster of the rival school at this centre table in the boys' dining hall, she had a clear view of both their faces.

"I wish they could be better friends", she thought, "just for my sake. If only they understood each other better."

Yet how could they ever understand each other? Their very blood was different.

Would they understand each other better if she told both of them the truth?

The fantastic idea shocked her—yet set her imagination working. Curiously detached, she considered the consequences of such a confession. How distressed John would be, how amused Maurice. But the detachment was only momentary. Once again she fell to castigating herself—as she had never quite ceased to castigate herself—for that long-ago adventure.

The fool she had been. All her life she must pay for this folly. Because . . .

" . . . Because I can never love Maurice like I love John", continued her thoughts. "Because I can't help despising myself for being fond of him. Just as I used to despise myself for being fond of Rupert. It's the same with both of them. I'm always happier when Maurice is abroad."

The cold certainty worried her. Still talking education with

the slightly pompous man on her right she tried to deny it. But self-knowledge continued to argue, "Why delude yourself? As long as Maurice isn't in England, you're a perfectly tranquil woman. The moment he's back, you begin to panic. You're frightened now. You don't trust him. You never have, since Nan said that queer thing when she was dying".

As the Reverend Septimus Holdsworth's third successor rose to say grace and the boys filed out of hall leaving the centre table to enjoy its coffee, Charlotte's fear increased, and her imagination began to suggest:

"Your sin hasn't found you out yet. But that's only because you've been lucky. It will one day. Soon perhaps".

Meanwhile the headmaster of St. Catherine's was saying, "I do hope you agree with me, Lady Carteret, that education without some religious basis—by which I do not mean religious bias—can never be true education".

She heard herself answer, with less than her usual tact, "I always feel that generalities are rather dangerous".

"But surely you're a religious woman?"

"Well, I certainly go to church."

§ 2

Her mother, rising from the table, saved Charlotte further controversy. But the disingenuousness of her last answer fretted her. She wished that she could have said frankly, "I go to church because it's part of my routine. But I don't believe in a personal god in the same way that my husband did, though I often wish that I could".

Thinking thus, as she and John went arm in arm through the gate in the white palings on to the cricket field, she began to realise how the years had softened her feelings for this John's father; and how little she had really appreciated him when he was alive.

"I should have loved him better and better as we grew older together", she seemed to know. "Because, as one grows older, one learns to value worth more and charm less."

That was why she loved this John so much. Even though

he was just a mite too worthy. But then, he knew that himself.

"The trouble with me", she remembered him saying, "is that I don't happen to have any vices. That's why I always find it so difficult to sympathise with other people's."

But he would learn to sympathise. After all, he wasn't forty yet. A mere boy.

John led her to a chair. The teams emerged from the pavilion. The two captains tossed up.

Charlotte heard Gertrude explaining to Prendergast, "These inter-school second eleven matches are a new idea. I'm not at all sure I agree with it. Altogether too competitive. But one must go with the times"; and Maurice asking, "What's the first eleven doing with itself?"

Told that they were playing another school on another ground, he said, "Doctor Wales? Why, I remember making a century against them".

"Then your memory", snapped Gertrude, "is as inaccurate as ever, because you made seventy-eight the first innings and got out for a duck in the second."

But Maurice only laughed; and, there being a shortage of chairs, sat down cross-legged near his mother.

"Makes a jolly picture", he thought as Hendersons went out to field. "Wish I'd brought a sketch book. Ought to be doing something better than just posters. If only one didn't need the money."

Then, with Johnny going on to bowl, he edged a little nearer to John, saying, after the first over, "Nearly had him out with that last one. Shapes jolly well. He's good at work, too, I hear. You must be very proud of him".

John admitted, "He's not a bad kid as they go nowadays", and Maurice couldn't help chuckling to himself at the ease with which he had penetrated his elder brother's guard.

"Only got to keep it up a bit", he told himself. "Have the noble baronet eating out of my hand before I've finished."

On which, Johnny caught and bowled his first wicket; and, clapping the feat, saying, "Wily! Did you see how he changed his pace", Maurice looked up at his mother. The way to her

best graces, also—his instincts told him—lay through her grandson.

Prendergast—he decided—had been quite right. Family rows didn't get one anywhere. He and John had been at loggerheads quite long enough.

"Never really disliked the chap", he brooded. "Never really disliked anybody. Hate having enemies."

All the same, one mustn't overplay even the best cards.

On that, as nearly always with him, thought became inconsequent; and presently he rose, strolled over to where Mercy sat with Philip; remained with them till St. Catherine's were all out.

Only after tea, with young Prendergast knocking the bowlers all over the field, did he return to his mother and John, and Johnny who was sitting beside them with his pads on, to say, "Well bowled, youngster. Four for twenty-six, wasn't it?"

"Twenty-eight", said Johnny. "But the last one was just luck. He ought to have left it alone. It was jolly nearly a wide, wasn't it, pater?"

And suddenly all that was best in Maurice went out to him, as it had never gone out to a human being before.

Nan's kid. A ripping little chap. But if he didn't get closer to John—if he couldn't make John leave off disliking him—he might never see this kid again. And Nan wouldn't like that. Because he and Nan had been so in love with each other. Though they had never given way to it. Though they had always played the game by John.

"We should have gone on playing the game, too", Maurice deluded himself, much as his father might have done; while Charlotte, watching him and John covertly, tried to fathom the processes of their minds.

But although she tried her hardest, the secret processes of both their minds eluded her; and once again she was conscious of fear when—Johnny having kept up the last wicket for Hendersons to win by ten runs—Maurice said, "If you've a minute or so to spare, John, there's something I'd rather like to talk to you about"; and the pair strolled away towards the new hard tennis court at the other side of the ground.

§ 3

It had been impossible to refuse his youngest brother's request. But John Carteret, watching their two shadows lengthen ahead of them across the grass, could not rid himself of the thought that it would have been far wiser to have done so. For years now, he and Maurice had been on terms of armed neutrality. Better let it stay at that.

"I expect he's in some money trouble", thought John. "If so, I suppose I shall have to help him."

Maurice's first words, accordingly, took him completely aback.

"Cheer up", grinned Maurice, considering the serious face. "I don't want to borrow anything."

And he strolled on another few paces before he continued, touching the skin under his left eye with one finger, "It's a long time since you held me down while mother shoved the iodine on that. You've forgotten it, I expect".

"No", said John, speaking even more slowly than usual. "I haven't."

"Neither", said Maurice, "have I."

He stopped, took out his silver case, and offered it. John's instinct was to say, "Thanks, but I hardly ever smoke them". Instead—feeling curiously moved—he took a cigarette, and Maurice struck a match for him.

"It's twenty years ago", he went on.

"Twenty-one", corrected John. "Nineteen twelve. The year father was drowned."

"By jove, you're right."

Maurice lit his own cigarette. So far, he had made no mistake. But he might—easily. John had always been a mass of prickles.

"There's something I ought to have told you a long time ago", he began.

The lashes flickered once over John's brown eyes.

"Then why didn't you?" he parried.

Maurice hesitated; then he took his courage in both hands.

"I'm never quite sure", he said. "I meant to, more than once. But somehow it didn't seem quite. . . decent. And

then . . . well I rather expected that you'd open up, if you'd found out anything, if . . . she'd left any papers. Did she?"

"Yes", said John. "She did."

"Oh."

Maurice's ejaculation puzzled John. There was an element of surprise in it. Yet a greater element of relief. "I'm glad you know", he seemed to be saying with those dark expressive eyes; but the lips under the flaxen moustache said, after a considerable pause:

"I wish you'd told me at the time. It would have made things so much easier".

"Probably", said John, after another pause, "it would."

"Then why didn't you?" persisted Maurice; and his brother flushed, ever so slightly, before he answered:

"I suppose I was too sore with you".

"Naturally." Maurice smiled. "But it really wasn't my fault, old chap. You realise that now, don't you?"

And of course—thought John—Nan's death hadn't been Maurice's fault. It had been just . . . an act of God.

"Yes", he said, speaking very slowly. "I do realise that now."

"Good." Maurice dropped his cigarette; hesitated again as he dug it into the turf with the heel of his brogued shoe, thinking, "Nan left her money to Johnny. I wonder just how much I did borrow from her".

Presently he asked, "Did you keep those papers?"

"No. I burned them."

"That was pretty decent of you. Still—a debt's a debt."

The words took John by surprise. They sounded so unlike Maurice.

"It doesn't matter", he heard himself say. "It's all over and done with. Let's forget about it."

"No. We can't do that."

"Why not?"

"Because it isn't our money. It's the kid's. She wouldn't like him not to have it."

That time sheer surprise held John dumb; and Maurice, seizing his advantage, continued, "As far as I recollect, it was about two hundred and fifty. Let's call it that, and I'll send

you a cheque to the office. Did . . . did you tell mother anything?"

"No."

"And you won't?"

"Not if you don't want me to."

"Thanks, old chap. I'm glad we've got down to brass tacks. There's only one other thing I'd like to say. And that's this. Don't let's have any more . . . misunderstandings. We're getting a bit too old for them."

Maurice, with a slightly foreign gesture, held out his hand. John took it.

"I've got to be just", thought John. "He's decent enough at heart. He never means any harm. He can't help having been born casual."

§ 4

On their way back to London, John found his mother's curiosity a little trying. Finally he was forced to say :

"Maurice made me promise I wouldn't tell you what we were talking about. But this much I can let you know. What he told me has given me an entirely different opinion of him. I can't help feeling that a good deal of the trouble has been my own fault".

To which Charlotte replied, "You are apt to be a little hard on people, aren't you, dear?"

"Yes. I suppose I am", admitted John.

They dined together. Later that night, preparing for bed in his three-roomed Westminster flat, he found himself no longer half-afraid—as he had been half-afraid all these years—to look the one photograph he had kept of Nan between the eyes.

"Forgive me, my dear", he heard himself whisper. "I've never understood much about women. If I had, I might have made you happier."

And to him—as once to his mother—there came the thought that the dangerous years were over; that now, at long last, the seven-year-old haunt was laid.

"After all"—he thought, just before he fell asleep—"Maurice would never have spoken about that money if everything hadn't been above board between him and Nan."

CHAPTER SEVENTY-ONE

§ 1

THE girl on the model throne pushed the dyed hair away from her eyes and laughed, "What a devil you are, Maurice. You know you don't care a damn for me".

"But I like kissing you."

"You couldn't make me care if you kissed me till doomsday."

"Frigid?"

"No. Just sensible. I've met your type before."

"So I'm a type, am I?"

"And a rotten bad one. I don't think I'll sit for you again."

"Why. Don't I pay enough?"

"Only for sitting." And that time they both laughed.

"I don't mind your being a bit of a Don Juan", went on the girl, resuming her pose as Maurice stepped back to his easel and picked up his palette. "What annoys me about you, is that you could be such a hell of a good painter if you'd only take the trouble."

"And starve in a garret."

"Well—some of them think even that's worthwhile."

She subsided into sulky silence. Maurice painted on, deftly, rapidly, flaring in his reds and blacks for poster value.

"More fools they", he said suddenly. "Art for art's sake and all that rot."

"You needn't be blasphemous."

"Blasphemous!"

"That's what I said, my dear. And that's what I meant. I don't suppose you ever go to church. I don't myself—at least not very often. But I know what the sin against the Holy Ghost means. It means painting potboilers when you don't need the money."

"But, dash it, I do need the money."

"What for? To spend on a lot of rotten women."

"Not very flattering to yourself, are you?"

"Is that a dishonourable proposal?"

"You might find it rather amusing to live with me for a bit."

"My dear Maurice, I'd rather be dead."

§ 2

Half an hour later, Wanda Glenn peeled off the Spanish shawl in which she had been sitting; put on her cheap hat; and went out across the cobbles towards King's Road.

"So I'm a devil and a type and a blasphemer, am I?" mused Maurice, regarding the back of her alluring figure through the side windows of the studio. "But why take the trouble to tell me so, my dear? Doesn't it display just a little too much personal interest?"

All the same, the girl's criticisms stung. He considered them again while he cleaned his brushes and hung up the Russian blouse he affected while at work.

"Could do better work", he decided. "Couldn't sell it, though. And it's all rot to say I only spend money on women. Do I ever grudge a pal a fiver? Is it my fault that I can't find a girl whom I can love enough to marry? What does she think I ought to do? Live like a bally Lippo Lippi."

He put on his coat, dusting it carefully before he did so; glanced at his wristwatch; lit a Turkish cigarette, and went out to the telephone. The voice at the other end of the wire said, "Sir Godfrey's gone to lunch, but he's left a message for you. He wants to know how soon the new Dentigloss poster will be ready. The printers are in a hurry for it".

"Tell him it'll be ready tomorrow. No. Make it the day after. I'm throwing a party tonight. You wouldn't care to come, I suppose?"

"I'm afraid I'm not very fond of parties", said Sir Godfrey Bonnington's secretary with some hauteur—and hung up.

Maurice's daily woman, anticipating a strenuous night, had asked to be let off lunch. He considered going out to a restaurant, but decided to cook himself an omelette instead.

Eating this on the kitchen table, he remembered the cheque he had promised to send John.

"A queer business", he thought as he lounged back into the studio, "that talk I had with John. Wonder what made me open up to him. The kid of course. Damn it, why haven't I got a kid like that? It'd be someone to work for anyway."

And, again, one of Wanda's phrases, "To spend on a lot of rotten women", recurred to his mind.

Sitting down at an ormolu desk—which had taken his fancy, a week or so previously, in the King's Road—he wrote out his cheque, scribbled a characteristic note, "Don't let Johnny spend all this on drink"; and experienced a new sense of well-being . . . till he began to look back through his counterfoils.

Gosh, he couldn't be as short of ready as all this! He owed quite a lot of bills, too. Not that any of the chaps were actually asking for the money. Besides, Sir Godfrey always paid on the nail. So why worry? After all he wasn't a blinking shopkeeper. He was a creative artist. And one day he would show the world just how well he could paint.

Sucks for Wanda, when he did.

Glancing round the studio, inspecting several half-finished canvases, his imagination began to work. He saw himself really famous, overwhelmed with commissions, refusing any sitter who didn't appeal to him.

Or should he take up landscape seriously? He'd always loved working in the open air.

Half an hour more passed to inconsequent dreams. Then the telephone rang again; and, answering it, he heard a jocular voice say, "I thought I'd better remind you we're playing tennis at three o'clock".

"I hadn't forgotten", he lied. "As a matter of fact I was just starting to change."

Then he ran to his bedroom, and put on flannels; ran to the garage, having posted his letter to John on the way; and only arrived at Ranelagh a quarter of an hour late.

§ 3

The hard exercise—he played lawn tennis, as he played all games, with a natural aptitude which almost compensated for his lack of application—restored Maurice's good humour. Afterwards, over mild drinks, he was at his most lavish, inviting all three of his companions to, "Look in at my place round about midnight, and bring anyone you like".

Driving home, however, he experienced reaction. This bachelor existence couldn't go on forever. He was over thirty. He'd had his fun. And what fun! But eventually a fellow ought to settle down.

On his return to his studio he found his daily woman—and a mysterious niece of hers, known only as Batsay, who always helped on such occasions—busy; and helped them to re-arrange some of the heavier furniture along the walls.

While he was shaving and taking his bath, the caterers' men arrived and began to set-up their buffet in the long narrow dining room. Before he pinned the orchid in the lapel of his double-breasted dinner jacket, the telephone had rung several times, each caller receiving the same answer, "That's quite all right, old chap. Bring your lovelies with you. The more the merrier".

The apparent popularity seemed to remove the last of his misgivings.

"There's one thing about me", he decided as he climbed back into his open sports car; "wherever I go, I make friends."

§ 4

The warmth, the clear sunshine of the June evening, heightened Maurice's anticipations of pleasure. He might be a bit lonely every now and again; but at least he was a free man. He owed allegiance to nobody. Not that it mightn't be just as well—an angry hoot and a furiously waving hand informed him as he turned up Sloane Street—to keep on his correct side of the road!

Traffic-driving in London—after Paris and Madrid and Vienna—proved rather trying. Blocked in Piccadilly, he per-

ceived from the various clocks there that he would be at least a quarter of an hour late at the *Hasta la Vista*—and hoped Philip would have the sense to ask for his table and order drinks.

At which exact moment he perceived “the loveliest creature he had ever seen”.

The young woman—he decided at first glance that she was no longer a girl—sat with a large florid man, bull-necked and gleaming of shirt front, on the back seat of the car alongside him—an enormous chauffeur-driven limousine. Her hair, dressed Madonna-wise, was real raven’s wing; her skin the true magnolia. She wore an ermine coatee with a spray of orchids trailing from one shoulder.

“Beauty and the beast”, thought Maurice as their eyes met.

Her eyes were completely incurious. He might have been a traffic policeman for all the notice they seemed to take of him. Yet somehow or other he knew that he had not gone entirely unobserved.

The block broke. The big car moved on; turned for Shaftesbury Avenue. Following it, Maurice could still see the back of the young woman’s head and the ugly neck of her companion bulging over his high collar.

Then the car turned again; and, still following, he became conscious of the strangest excitement. They might be going to the same place. They were going to the same place.

Gosh!

CHAPTER SEVENTY-TWO

§ 1

THE black and cream Isotta drew up at the Hasta la Vista. The chauffeur sprang from his box. The big man, leaning heavily on a stick, stepped out. "Dolores"—as Maurice had christened her—followed. She was tall, slim, with lovely hands and the neatest ankles.

Braking, asking the porter if he were allowed to park, excitement grew on him. Somehow or other, he would make the acquaintance of this Dolores. Or die in the attempt.

"*Coup de foudre?*" he asked himself, driving on a few yards and stopping his engine at the porter's orders. "Me! How perfectly ridiculous."

But, walking through the door of the restaurant, listening to his mother's, "Oh, no. You haven't kept us waiting. Only about twenty-five minutes"; smiling at her and Mercy and Philip, "I'm terribly sorry. Why didn't you go in and sit down?" he remained conscious—though one part of his mind scoffed at the other for the mere suggestion—of having fallen in love.

The black-avised proprietor came out into the little entrance hall while Maurice was still scoffing at himself. Charlotte noticed—not altogether with approval—that they shook hands; but the few sentences they exchanged, being in Spanish, eluded her, except for Maurice's last, "*amigo*", which he explained at once.

"I've known old Pepito for donkeys' years", he said to Mercy. "He used to keep a little hotel just outside Barcelona. I hope you're not absolutely starving."

"If she isn't", put in Philip, "I am." And he made for the double doors.

Charlotte followed through. Mercy and Maurice brought up the rear. The proprietor conducted them to their table.

"You two", said Maurice, "sit on the sofa. Philip and I will take the chairs."

One waiter produced the menu; another the wine list. Studying these, translating the names of the various dishes, he felt almost afraid to lift his eyes.

Pepito—bless the man—had done his stuff; changed their table. Dolores was sitting within a foot or two of Mercy. Dinner ordered, he looked her full in the face.

Her eyes were still completely incurious. But, almost immediately, she averted them and he felt certain that she had recognised him. Meanwhile, however, he had his duty as host.

His mother, he knew, was still ruffled. Again he apologised for being late, saying, "It wasn't altogether my fault. Really it wasn't"; and Charlotte, happy in the thought that he and John were now reconciled, could not help laughing, "No. It was ours. Knowing you, we ought never to have been punctual"; while Philip chaffed, "It's a curious fact, but it's only really busy people who are ever on time for an appointment".

Then he, too, noticed the girl at the next table; and fell silent for a while, thinking, "I wonder what's the matter with her. She looks a bit dopey to me".

For although her companion never stopped talking, the young woman only answered in monosyllables or with an occasional nod of the head. It was not until Pepito approached the table and began speaking Spanish that she smiled a little and chattered a little.

But again, after Pepito had left the table, her eyes encountered Maurice's, and turned from him to the man beside her, and back again, very slowly, as though to say, "You see how I'm situated".

That look gave Maurice hope.

They were almost at the end of their dinner by then. Presently they finished their sweets, and he took out his cigarette case, catching her eye once more and asking :

"*La señorita permite ?*"

She did not speak, merely inclining her head. But it

seemed to him as though there were the ghost of a smile on her lips ; and that her companion favoured him with one look of distinct malevolence, which made this game—only wasn't it something rather more than a game?—very much worthwhile.

§ 2

Ten minutes later, the bull-necked man called for his bill ; paid it, and reached for his stick. Maurice's dark eyes followed the ill-assorted couple down the long room.

"Rather a nice bit of stuff", he observed, stroking his moustache with an assumption of nonchalance.

"But your attempt at scraping acquaintance", said his mother, "fell distinctly flat."

Her penetration disturbed him.

"I was only being polite", he protested.

"Oh, yeah", scoffed Philip ; and Mercy smiled, "You were always rather susceptible, I've been told. How soon do we have to go on to your party?"

"Time", remarked Maurice, recovering his composure, "was made for business men."

"We 'artists' ", snapped Charlotte, "being a race apart."

"And why not, mother ? After all, somebody's got to put a little colour into this modern world. It's drab enough, in all conscience. What I always say, is——"

But before Maurice could get into his stride Pepito was bending down to whisper, "*El hombre se llama Bonnington . . . Si . . . El primo de Sir Godfrey . . . El nombre de la señora no conozco*".

Confidences continued. The lady—Pepito continued—certainly spoke Spanish very well. For himself, however, he did not consider she was a Spaniard. There was an inflexion, a suggestion of the *Americana*.

Asking for his own bill, Maurice explained, "Funny coincidence. That chap with the stick is the cousin of my best client—Bonnington, the advertising bloke".

"Then if I were you", chuckled Philip, "I should keep off the grass."

His bill merely signed—Charlotte noticed the lavishness of the tip and that he did not even trouble to check the addition—

Maurice drew one of the latest watches from his trouser pocket, slid it open, and said, "My hat, we'd better be getting a move on or they'll have consumed all the liquor before we arrive"; and, turning to her, "Shall I drive you back to Herbert's, or will my reverend mother condescend to grace a Bohemian party?"

"Just this once to oblige me", he coaxed; and laid a hand on her bare arm.

As always when he assumed this mood, (instinctively, she knew it for assumed), Charlotte felt herself weakening; and, with Mercy adding her plea to his, she yielded.

"You may be a little shocked", grinned Maurice. "But not much."

He escorted her to the car; settled her in one of the front buckets, Mercy and Philip in the back seat; gave the porter an extravagant shilling; and flung his long legs over the low door.

Tonight—it seemed to Charlotte—he was pure Rupert. He even drove like Rupert, till she protested, "I don't mind arriving in a state of dishevelment, but, if it's all the same to you, I would rather arrive whole".

He drove more carefully after that; and she fell to wondering whether he really cared for her, or for anybody in the world except himself.

"I wish I didn't know him so well", she caught herself thinking; and, with a sudden access of sentiment, "He was such a pet when he was a baby. It isn't his fault if women run after him, if he hasn't got any sense of money."

Meanwhile he had said, "I wonder why you've never let me do a portrait of you, mother darling. You really ought to be painted".

"And put on a hoarding!"

"Let's say on a pedestal."

"When you put any member of my sex on a pedestal, Maurice, you must send me a wire."

§ 3

His mother's sarcasm, like her penetration, disturbed Maurice. He drove on in silence—through Piccadilly, by the

roundabout at Hyde Park Corner and into Knightsbridge. Philip and Mercy—he could just see in his driving mirror—were holding hands.

“But it won’t last”, he tried to assure himself. “Marriage never does. It’s no good letting oneself fall in love to that extent.”

Could one help it, though, if one really went in off the deep end?

He was picturing Dolores again by then; wondering if she were Bonnington’s mistress. But the mere idea revolted all the artist in him. Impossible that anyone so lovely could have given herself to anyone so foul.

Obsessed by this thought, concentration failed him for a second, and only Charlotte’s, “Look out”, wrenched his wheel over in time to save a careless boy who stepped off the pavement against the lights.

“You needn’t have said anything”, he lied. “I saw the young idiot before you did.”

But his heart seemed to have turned over inside him; and they were halfway along King’s Road before he could rid himself of the horrible thought, “If she hadn’t warned me, I might have hurt, I might even have killed that child”.

There were several other cars parked under the three trees in the communal courtyard that served various studios. Recognising one of them, Maurice forgot the narrow escape.

“Some of the folk here already”, he laughed. “And that’s my gramophone going. Come along.”

He helped his mother out; and apologised for the cobbles. Through an open door came a fat young man with a glass in his hand, who mocked, “So charming of you to come, Carteret”.

Maurice chaffed back, “You weren’t invited till half-past ten. What’s that bubbly like?”

“Oh, it might be worse. Have some?”

“Perhaps I will, presently. Mother, this is Bill Bettisloe. He’s by way of being an actor.”

“Singer”, corrected the fat young man. “How do you do, Lady Carteret?”

Introduced to Mercy, he continued, “I expect you’d like

to park your wraps. As far as we've been able to ascertain one leaves them in the bedroom. There doesn't seem to be anywhere else".

The bedroom was tidy. Mercy and Charlotte, having abandoned their cloaks with some misgivings, entered the studio together. More introductions followed. The fat young man asked Mercy to dance. Maurice led his mother to a divan. She signalled to Philip, who joined her, chuckling, "This doesn't seem exactly your line of country. What do you think of the young lady in beach pyjamas?"

"On the whole", said Charlotte, "I would rather not think about her."

Yet within half an hour—by which time, it seemed to her, the big room held more than enough people and far too much smoke for comfort—disapproval gave way to curiosity, and another feeling she found difficulty in analysing.

Could she possibly be a little jealous, a little envious, of this "rather cheap crowd"?

The question seemed ridiculous. Nevertheless, it worried her. Considering her own youth—nearly all Maurice's female friends looked as though they were still in their twenties—she wondered if it had been too inhibited. Then, for the very first time in her life, she found herself understanding, almost sympathising with, what she had taken to calling, "the Maurice point of view".

All Maurice really wanted—she saw in that one moment of comprehension—was release from the normal routine. He could no more have led John's life, or Philip's, than Philip or John could lead his. And how handsome he was, what a splendid host he made, how all these young men and young women seemed to adore him. They thought him clever, too, if she could judge by various scraps of conversation she overheard.

And here he was, asking her to dance.

She refused, but let him lead her to the buffet, pour her out a glass of champagne.

"It must be getting on for midnight", she said. "I think I'll play Cinderella. Somehow, your friends make me feel my age. I can have a taxi, I suppose."

"I'll drive you home if you like."

"And leave your own party?"

"Oh, they wouldn't care. I don't know who half of them are. Do you think Philip and Mercy are enjoying themselves?"

"I imagine so. They seem to be dancing a lot."

"Philip"—Maurice hesitated for a moment—"is a better mixer than John. I wouldn't dare ask the head of the family to this kind of a show."

"Yet you invited me."

He quizzed her as Rupert might have done. Then he said, very slowly:

"You're so much more understanding than John, though you do pretend to be straightlaced. I often wonder how much you really disapprove of me, and how much you . . . sympathise with me".

Perturbed in her turn—his judgment of her attitude towards him was a little too accurate for comfort—Charlotte parried swiftly:

"And since when have you developed an inferiority complex, since when do you need maternal sympathy?"

But her youngest son only laughed, "Don't be so disingenuous, darling"; and broke off to stare at the dining room door.

§ 4

Two men had just edged in through the door; and one of those men was Sir Godfrey Bonnington.

The other walked with a stick; and just behind him Maurice saw . . . Dolores herself.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-THREE

§ 1

SIR GODFREY—shorter than his cousin, with eyebrows like cooked prawns, squat shoulders, and a reddish face now twinkling with assiduously cultivated *bonhomie*—gave a hairy hand before Maurice could recover from his surprise.

"I'm sorry to be so late", he croaked. "Hope you don't mind my having brought my cousin with me. We ran into each other quite by accident at a little supper party. Henry, meet one of our most prominent young artists. Carteret's got the real stuff in him—as I was telling you while we came along. Oh—and this is Miss Raiman."

Maurice managed to say, "Charmed".

The young woman, seen at close quarters, was even more attractive than the picture he had been carrying in his mind. As an artist, he could find no single fault. As a man, he felt a little disappointed that she did not offer him even the tips of her exquisitely manicured fingers, merely inclining her head and saying, in moderately good English :

"I'm sure it's very nice of you to allow us to come to your party".

"My mother", went on Maurice.

Sir Godfrey said, "I'm delighted to meet you, Lady Carteret. You must be very proud of your son".

One of the hired waiters opened another bottle of champagne.

"I've seen you somewhere before, Mr. Carteret", pronounced Henry Bonnington, eyeing Maurice over the top of his glass. "Only I can't for the life of me remember where."

Her youngest son burked the question with a smiling, "Perhaps I've got a double"; and Charlotte held her tongue, watching the girl, whose faint amusement was obvious even before she interposed, "If you weren't so vain, Henry, you'd

do what your oculist tells you, and wear your glasses all the time instead of just for reading”.

Sir Godfrey's cousin retorted, “Maybe I see quite enough without them, Lina”; and Charlotte, turning, happened to observe Maurice's face.

Only once before—memory told her—had she seen that precise look on a human face. And in another second memory was conjuring up the actual words which had accompanied that look, “I tell you, you *can't* do that. I want you. You're the only creature on God's earth I do want”.

Then the long-ago picture of Rupert vanished, and all that she could perceive was this very ordinary scene—these two rather gross men drinking their champagne, and this lovely (she was more than lovely, decided Charlotte) young woman whom they had brought with them, and Maurice, debonair as ever, stroking his moustache, as he asked :

“Don't you think you'll find that fur a little warm, Miss Raiman? Shall I relieve you of it?”

“Thank you, Mr. Carteret. That sounds quite a good idea.”

§ 2

Charlotte, somehow on the *qui vive*, was now observing Sir Godfrey—one of those hairy hands went to the girl's shoulders at once.

“*Épris*”, she decided. “And the other one knows it. What an extremely unpleasant situation. I think I'll be off.”

But several minutes went by to inconsequent chatter before Philip's entrance with Mercy gave her the opportunity to suggest, “I wonder how much longer you young people are going to stay up. Because I'm rather sleepy”.

For Maurice also—she realised—was a little *épris*; and she could not help wondering, with a touch of the old malicious humour, just how much he would dislike being reminded of his promise to drive her home.

Philip, mopping his forehead with a silk handkerchief, answered at once, “I'm quite ready to quit; and so is Mercy, aren't you, honey?”

Maurice, however, insisted on introducing them both to

Sir Godfrey; and several more minutes went by, with the whole crowd jostling in from the studio, before he kissed his mother good night at the doorway.

"You'll be all right with Philip", he said in a low voice. "There are plenty of taxis. Don't mind my not coming out with you. Sir G.'s rather an important fellow. I simply must make a bit of a fuss of him."

"As long as you only make a fuss of *him*", laughed Philip; and Mercy favoured her brother-in-law with a malicious wink.

"Good luck, bad man", whispered Mercy. "She really is the most gorgeous thing that ever happened."

That of course—thought Maurice—was correct. Though Mercy had no right to say so. Because . . . because Lina was sacred.

Amazing idea. Footling idea. Nevertheless, true.

For a moment he stood arguing with himself. Women—with the possible exception of Nan—were all alike. One just "took one's fun where one found it". If he could get this young woman away from Henry Bonnington . . .

But the mere suspicion of their relationship—no, not suspicion, certainty—her remark, Bonnington's retort, proved it—sent the blood hammering to Maurice's forehead. That swine must have some hold over her. She could never have given herself to him willingly. The filthy old man!

Slowly, stopping here and there to exchange a jocular word with his guests, he made his way back to her. Her glass was empty. He signalled a waiter to fill it.

Henry Bonnington said, "I should have thought you'd had enough for one evening"; and Sir Godfrey, "Don't be a spoilsport. Let the girl enjoy herself for once."

"The trouble with my cousin", he went on, turning to Maurice, "is that, just because he isn't allowed to drink much himself, he thinks nobody else ought to."

Henry scowled. Lina laughed, "Don't take any notice, Mr. Carteret. I never come out with them but they don't start quarrelling"; and lifted the brimming glass to her mouth.

Her mouth was a red temptation. Her eyes—it seemed to Maurice—were no longer incurious. They had sent him another message, "That's good. Don't let him recognise you",

while he was prevaricating, "Perhaps I've got a doubt. Now they flashed him a third, "There's something I'd like to tell you. Only I can't while they're here".

He felt so certain he had interpreted her third message correctly, that he had no hesitation about asking, the moment the gramophone was once more audible, "How about a spot of the light fantastic?"

She looked at both the Bonningtons before she answered through tight lips, "Well, I don't mind, just for five minutes". But once beyond the doorway she smiled to herself, and when Maurice asked, "What's the joke please?" she answered him in Spanish:

"*Usted*. You are. Do you imagine I did not know why Pepito changed your table?"

"Then you did see me in Piccadilly?"

"And recognised you the moment you came into the *Hasta la Vista*. It is fortunate, is it not, that some people are not so observant?"

"*Puede ser*", smiled Maurice.

She took him up instantly. "No. No *puede ser*. Five minutes. And we part".

"Why?"

"Because, as the *Americanos* say, I do not cheat."

There was no smile on her lips now—and no mistaking the implication of those last words, which hurt Maurice more than anything had ever hurt him before. He could hardly bring himself to put his arm round her. Yet once their hands touched, he forgot everything except her loveliness.

Let her be all, and more than all, that she had hinted. He wanted her. He wanted her more than he had ever believed he could want anything in the world.

She danced as well as he did, with a lithe swaying of the hips, of her whole body. Even on that crowded floor, they seemed to be alone with each other—the coarseness, the garishness, the vulgarity of this studio party shut away from them, excluded from their dreams.

And somehow he knew that theirs were mutual dreams; that the words she had spoken meant nothing; that, one day, she would be his.

So that his next speech struck him as altogether strange ; as though some man not himself were speaking.

"I should never ask you to cheat", he said, bending his head close to hers. "I would never . . . share you."

For the fraction of a second, they lost step. He felt her body stiffen, shiver. Then it relaxed, and she was laughing :

"For an Englishman, you are marvellous. Such technique !"

He hesitated for another fraction of a second. Then the stranger who had taken charge of him said :

"Between us, it would have to be all or nothing".

She made no answer, but her whole body seemed to enfold him, while the man who was his real self whispered, "What the hell do you think you're up to ? That was as good as a proposal of marriage" ; and the stranger, "Why not ? You're going to marry her, because you can't go on living without her".

The *coup de foudre*. Love at first sight.

Ridiculous. Utterly preposterous.

Nevertheless—true !

§ 3

The gramophone record had run down. They were no longer dancing. With one certain movement, Lina had freed herself from Maurice's hand and arm.

"*No puede ser*", she repeated.

"Our five minutes are over", she went on after a pause.

"Take me back to my——" And the one word she used seared Maurice to the bone:

"Don't", he said, speaking with a simplicity foreign to all his previous nature. "I can't bear it."

"Neither can I—sometimes."

"Then why ?"

"Because only fools let themselves starve, *amigo*."

She shrugged her shoulders. Their cool sheen dazzled him. All his inherited capacity for selfdelusion shouted, "Don't take her back to that foul man. Go and knock his head off. Tell him to get out. Tell all these people to get out. Keep her here".

But already she had turned from him ; was moving towards

the doorway. Following her, he said to himself "I don't care what she is. I don't care what she has been. I could kill for her"; then, "Crazy. You can't want any woman as much as this".

Aloud, catching up with her in the doorway, he said, his voice low in his throat, "You mustn't go back to him. I love you".

Again she made no answer; only continued to move away from him, forcing him to follow her towards that other doorway.

He had never known what it meant to see red—he realised—until that faint pink mist, clotted here and there with scarlet corpuscles, rose up between him and the picture of her, laying a hand on Henry Bonnington's sleeve.

"I think we ought to be off now", she was saying in English. "It's been a nice party."

Then Sir Godfrey croaked, "Just a minute, my dear. The cousin and I have been having a little talk. As you know, he's always wanted a really good picture painted of you. So I've been doing my best to persuade him that Carteret's the right man for the job. Provided of course that he's agreeable".

"Agreeable?" thought Maurice; and suddenly the mist cleared, suddenly he seemed to be himself again, very cool, very wary, and with his sense of humour uppermost. What a comedy—if this gross fool could be persuaded to let Lina sit to him.

What a comedy. And what a chance.

He looked at her, expecting her to speak. Sir Godfrey looked at her—and Maurice, had he been more on his guard, might have observed the covetousness in those heavily browed, sparsely lashed eyes. But though Lina's eyes were full on Henry, she said nothing; and in another second Maurice's best patron was continuing:

"Well, Carteret. How does the idea appeal to you?"

He managed to be noncommittal, and even modest:

"I'm not really a portrait painter, though of course I've tried my hand at it. Your cousin really ought to have somebody better known——"

"And pay fancy prices", grunted Henry Bonnington.

"Not if I know it. I asked ——" he named a famous member of the Academy, "if he'd do her for me. What do you think he had the impertinence to ask? A thousand guineas. A thousand and fifty pounds if you please, just for a few hours' daubing."

Maurice, his sense of humour still uppermost, suggested, "It does sound rather stiff".

"Stiff." Henry Bonnington put his fat hand over Lina's, which still rested on his sleeve. "Barefaced robbery. Why, Godfrey here can buy me a page in the Daily ——" he named a famous newspaper, "for that. I'm a business man, Mr. Carteret. Proud of it, too. Where'd we be without commerce? So if I'm going to have Lina done at all, the price has got to be a commercial one. Though I want a first-class job, mind you? No skimping. Full length, I believe you call it."

"In evening dress, I expect", put in Maurice, his hatred of the man at war with his secret laughter.

"Oh, I'd leave that to you and her. The question is—what'll it cost me? I wouldn't mind going to a couple of hundred, or even two hundred and fifty."

"That's more than I pay him for a poster." Sir Godfrey's eyes were veiled as he made the interruption. "You'll take it on, won't you, Carteret? Just to oblige me."

Henry Bonnington said, "I won't go to a penny more. You must take it or leave it"; and Maurice pretended to hesitate before he agreed, "All right. Only I'm afraid Miss Raiman won't be an easy subject. I may want a good many sittings. And I'd like to start fairly soon. Because I'm going away in about a month's time".

Only then did Lina speak.

"Are you quite sure you want to have me painted, Henry?" she asked—and to Maurice every syllable seemed to carry its hidden meaning.

"Sure? Of course, I'm sure. Do you think I'd have offered him all that money if I wasn't", grunted Henry Bonnington.

And five minutes later Maurice Carteret, the red mist once more blinding him, was escorting the trio through the courtyard into the King's Road.

§ 4

A clock chimed one as Maurice watched the tail light of that black and cream Isotta whisk for the West End. It was nearer four than three by the time the last of his guests, having thanked him for a "grand party", staggered arm in arm out of the courtyard; and he came back to the empty studio, littered with cigarette ends and foul with the fumes of beer and whiskey, reproaching himself, "I used to think this sort of thing was life".

For obviously—said the stranger who had taken possession of him—this was not life. And presently the stranger said, "You've always been a rotter. But that's finished. You're going to turn over a completely new leaf. You're going to save Lina from Bonnington. Not for selfish reasons, though you do love her so much, but for her own sake".

Because this was the nearest he had ever reached to true unselfishness, Maurice—for all the sophistication on which he still prided himself—could not perceive the fallacy in the stranger's argument. Any more than he could perceive that the stranger was only his old self in a new guise.

He had always followed the call of his desires. But hitherto those desires had been little more than fancies.

Now, for the first time in his easy-going existence, he had fallen prey to a stronger emotion—which was to fuse all the best and all the worst of him in one consuming fire.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-FOUR

§ 1

HALF-PAST five of that June morning found Rupert Whittinghame's son still sleepless, with every window of the studio flung wide. Selfdelusion—key instinct of his character—forbade sleep. Last night—he kept telling himself—he had been “reborn”.

Presently, he went to his bath. The ice-cold water seemed to typify his change of soul. He had done with all the old slacknesses. From now on, he would have a real purpose—not art for art's sake, but life for life's sake.

Because at last, at long last, he was really in love.

The knowledge made him feel strangely humble and a little guilty. Wanda Glenn's judgment on him had been the correct one. He could be “a hell of a good painter” if only he'd take the trouble. And from now on he would. If only for Lina's sake. With a woman as lovely as Lina to work for, a fellow simply must do the best that was in him.

For curiously he had no doubt whatsoever that he was going to marry Lina. No man could love as he loved—and not be loved in return.

Still tingling from his bath, he slipped on a coloured shirt, a pair of linen trousers, socks and brogues. The milkman was just depositing bottles at his front door.

“Jolly morning”, said Maurice.

“Up a bit early, ain't you?”

“Haven't been to bed as a matter of fact.”

“Haven't you, though.” And, “Crazy folk, all these artists”, thought the milkman as Maurice jog-trotted off through the archway and broke into a sharp run.

He ran for nearly half an hour—occasional stares, and an occasional cry, “Go on, Steve, you'll win the Derby”, only

ministering to his vanity. Then he began to feel hungry; and, jog-trotting again, looked for somewhere to eat.

Presently he recognised a narrow street that led to the river; took it; and halted, with the sun in his eyes, by a bow-fronted shop which displayed a notice, "Teas. Light Lunches. Morning Coffee".

The white door yielded to his pressure. A girl in green linen was just laying a green-topped table.

"I hope I'm not too early", began Maurice.

"Well—we're not supposed to be open till seven."

"Never mind. Be an angel. See what you can do."

The girl—automatically he noticed that she had hazel eyes, fair hair, and an almost perfect skin—dimpled at him:

"All right. What do you want?"

"Oh, just coffee and rolls will do."

"And butter?"

"If you can manage it. You don't sell cigarettes, I suppose."

"Only gaspers."

She stooped under a low counter; handed him a yellow packet, and disappeared.

There were matches on the table. He opened the packet; lit himself an unaccustomed Virginia, and sat down. In a few minutes, the girl came back with a tray.

"Shall I pour out for you?" she asked.

"Don't bother. I'm sure you're busy."

"Well—I am rather. Got to get everything ready before the customers come."

She began to lay another table. Watching her, he had the strangest impulse to ask her to sit down, to tell her what had happened to him overnight.

"Make her stare", he thought. "Not the sort of thing that happens to everybody. Never would have believed it possible. Always used to laugh when I read about it."

So perhaps she would laugh. Perhaps he'd better hold his tongue.

The coffee was mediocre, the roll stale. This place, on further inspection, didn't seem any too clean. He asked how much he owed; was told, "That'll be fivepence please"; tried to remember whether he'd brought any money; searched his trouser pockets, and discovered a forgotten coin.

"That's all right, my dear", he said, handing over the shilling. "Keep the change."

The girl stared after him as he went through the door.

"I wonder who he is", she thought. "I'll bet he's a swell. He seemed ever so nice, and he's ever so good-looking, even when he hasn't shaved."

§ 2

Back at his studio, with Mrs. Milligan, his daily woman, exclaiming, "Lor, Mr. Carteret, I was starting to wonder what 'ad 'appened to you", Maurice plied a careful razor, and was sitting down to eggs and bacon by half-past eight.

He had told Wanda not to come till the afternoon. But she only lived a hundred yards away; and, his breakfast finished, he asked Mrs. Milligan to fetch her. She came in about twenty minutes later to find him already at his easel.

"You up and about at this time", she chaffed. "And after a party, too. Well, well. Wonders'll never cease."

"Something's happened", he wanted to say. "I'm not the same man you sat to yesterday." But again he suppressed that inherited impulse to unnecessary confidences, thinking, "She wouldn't believe me anyway. Why—I can hardly believe it myself".

He painted even faster than his wont that morning, and talked hardly at all. At the end of two hours, he laid down his palette, saying, "That's the last touch. I couldn't make it any better if I tried. Come and tell me what you think of yourself?"

Wanda came down from the model throne very slowly.

"I shouldn't be surprised", she said, after inspecting the picture, "if I sold quite a lot of toothpaste. What's the next one going to be—biscuits?"

"Probably."

"And you're still not ashamed of yourself?"

But her eyes belied the bitterness of her speech. They were very tender. The hand that peeled off the shawl trembled. So that all his instincts, all his many experiences of light love, told him that she could be his for the asking; that he need only kiss her, as he had kissed her yesterday . . .

And, after all, why not?

For the fraction of a minute, all his new-born self went by the board. For the split of a second, he imagined the fun of knowing her reluctances conquered. Then the stranger took charge of him again, and he heard himself say:

"The trouble with you, Wanda, my dear, is that you're the complete young highbrow. Thank the lord, I know which side my bread's buttered. And now you'll have to run away, because I'm going to have an early lunch and indulge in a spot of shut-eye afterwards. Only first—I'd better pay you what I owe you".

Her eyes flinched as he handed over the money. He realised that he had hurt her. He felt more than sorry for her. But his resolution held till she was across the courtyard. And, curling himself on the divan after he had eaten again, he forgot all about her, remembering only Lina, who would be here, sitting to him—actually sitting to him, just they two alone in the studio—within the next thirty-six hours.

The excitement of that thought, and a nascent curiosity, kept him awake for a long time. Even when he slept, it was only fitfully. Long before dinner time, he was on his feet again, prowling aimlessly from one of his haunts to another—out of Chelsea into Hyde Park, out of Hyde Park to his club, out of his club to a grill room, where he fell in with a man and a woman of his acquaintance and insisted on accompanying them to a cinema.

All that time, curiosity grew on him. Who was this Lina? He didn't even know her nationality. Yet the conviction of his love for her, of his determination to marry her, endured. Nor could he laugh away—though, every now and again, his old self tried to laugh away—an impulse altogether new to him.

That identical impulse to play at false chivalry—to see oneself the supreme selfsacrificer in the mirror of one's own vanity—which had once driven his father to East Africa with another man's wife.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-FIVE

§ 1

HIS inherited impulse to false chivalry was still dominant in Maurice when he woke next day. He could actually contemplate—he could almost revel—in the thought that Lina was Henry Bonnington's mistress. Because, unless there were some kind of a dragon, how could one play Saint George?

There might also—said experience—have been men before Bonnington. But what—asked selfdelusion—did her past, or his own, matter? Their mutual love would purify them.

Not that anybody as lovely as Lina, as young as Lina, could be really bad.

He had slept his usual eight hours that night. Still drowsy, he heard the clatter of his coffee tray and Mrs. Milligan's feet heavy along the passage that led to his bedroom door.

"The paper hasn't come", said Mrs. Milligan. "But there's a letter for you"; and she went out, leaving that envelope in John's handwriting on the bed.

"Wonder what he's got to say for himself", thought Maurice; and suddenly remembered the cheque he had posted, on his way to play tennis, forty-eight hours before.

John—so like him!—enclosed a formal receipt for the money. But his covering letter—wonders would never cease—concluded:

"Philip is having lunch with me tomorrow. Why don't you join us? It's a long time since we three forgathered. Don't bother to telephone me. I shall be in court all the morning. Just turn up if you can"

"Don't see why I shouldn't", decided Maurice. "Lina isn't coming till four."

He took his usual hot bath that morning; and dressed at

leisure, singing to himself, now in French, now in Spanish, now in Italian. Afterwards he spent a happy hour going through his portfolios, quizzing this sketch, that water-colour. There seemed no doubt that he could be a great artist, if only he put his back into the job.

Eleven o'clock found him filling his cigarette case, brushing his bowler hat, polishing the gold knob of his malacca stick. By half-past—with plenty of time to waste and the sun shining—he was strolling idly along Piccadilly and up Bond Street, where he dropped in to an exhibition of French pictures, and devoted many rapt minutes to an Ingres.

If only one could learn to paint like Ingres! And one could, with Lina for model. No doubt about that.

As he left the gallery, her physical image began to obsess him. Mentally, he arranged a background of draperies; seated her on his model throne; posed her. . . . Till more sensuous thoughts intervened; and he was standing over her, raising first one of her lovely hands, then both of them to his lips.

The hoot of a car horn broke up that imaginary love scene. Stepping quickly back to the pavement, he realised that it must be almost one o'clock; hailed a taxi; and was driven the four hundred yards or so to John's club in St. James' Street, on whose steps he met Philip, in a suit fresh from Savile Row, with a gardenia at his button hole.

John—the hall porter informed them—had not yet arrived.

§ 2

Mercy and their mother—Philip told Maurice while they waited in the gloomy red marble hall—were lunching together prior to a *matinée*.

"I've got a little business to do", he went on. "Cables to answer and that sort of thing. When are you coming out to the States again? You could make more money at your game in America than you do here."

"Possibly." Maurice hesitated. "But I'm not sure I want to go on doing commercial work. It doesn't really lead anywhere."

"Attack of artistic ambition?" Philip's blue eyes seemed just a little too shrewd. "I shouldn't give way to that if I were you. We've all of us got to earn our livings."

"Yes. I suppose so."

"Suppose so, my dear chap."

"Oh well", grinned Maurice, "I can always touch you for a bit, now that you're such a millionaire."

Philip took the remark in good part. Yet it grated a little. The whole personality of Maurice grated a little. This younger brother of his took life so devilish lightly—as though it were a mere game.

"You're a funny chap", he hazarded a few sentences later. "Don't you ever take anything seriously?"

"Not if I can help it."

But for the third time, though he spoke as nonchalantly as ever, Maurice experienced that impulse to confession; and only stifled it at the sight of John, who came in full of apologies for being ten minutes behind time, and conducted them to a smoking room even gloomier than the hall.

John—Maurice realised—was at his friendliest.

"Rather a unique occasion, Philip", he said, holding his sherry glass to the light. "It must be the best part of eight years since we three had a meal together. Maurice was on one of his jaunts the last time you came over."

Then he talked a little about the case on which he was engaged, rather Greek to his youngest brother but interesting to Philip, who commented, "We don't let that sort of thing come into court if we can help it. But then our labour unions—sorry, trade unions—aren't like yours. Quite a few of them are rackets, though of course the craft brotherhoods——"

"What's a craft brotherhood?" asked John; and, while Philip explained, Maurice's thoughts wandered.

"Funny", he said to himself, "that we three are so different; that they're so matter of fact, so businesslike." Aloud he interrupted, "If the black sheep of the family may be allowed to make a suggestion, isn't it about time we thought of feeding?" and could not help being a little amused at the effect of his remark on John, whose brown eyes quizzed him, not altogether unkindly.

"Exaggerating as usual", smiled John. "But the suggestion is accepted"; and he led them out of the smoking room towards the dining room, continuing, as they came to the desk in the doorway, "We may as well order before we sit down".

§ 3

Maurice, whose own fist would have baffled Horace Greeley's printer, noticed the careful way in which John wrote out their three orders.

"Careful chap altogether", he mused. "I must try to be more like him."

Yet for all John's carefulness—Maurice decided—John wasn't really a man of the world. Neither, if it came to that, was Philip. *Their* lives ran in grooves.

"Rather be myself"—continued his decision—"than either of them. More experience." One experience, nevertheless, he always envied them. Both had been soldiers. And this envy recurred to him when, after they crossed the room to their table in the window, Philip turned the talk on war, saying :

"I've been thinking quite a lot about our talk in the car going down to Hendersons. But I still can't see your point of view or rather your government's. After all, the other nations are rearming".

John said, "You don't seem to have any idea what it would cost. The electorate simply won't stand for any more taxation".

Philip laughed, "Perhaps they would. If you told them the truth. But politicians never do that, I imagine".

"Oh, they get it in small doses. As much of it as is good for them."

But although John sounded so cynical, Philip could see that he was considerably worried; and towards the end of luncheon he brought up the subject again.

"What do you think?" he asked Maurice. "After all, you know the Continent better than most people."

The deference, from John, was very pleasant. Maurice gave his opinion, which agreed with Philip's, flattering himself that it had not been without its effect.

His opinion of John—it seemed to Maurice as he drank his coffee—had undergone a complete change. He positively liked the man. And, really, it was a pity Philip didn't live in England. A jolly intelligent chap, Philip. Between the three of them, they had more brains than most families.

"You two must have lunch with me one of these days", he pronounced, sipping John's brandy and smoking John's cigar—and before they parted, some quarter of an hour later, he insisted on fixing the date.

"He's not a bad chap, you know", said Philip as the two elder brothers watched that taller figure in the brown suit with the gold-knobbed malacca under one arm, swing off towards St. James' Palace. "After all he's ever so much younger than we are, so we ought to make plenty of allowances."

"Quite." John tugged at his moustache. "I agree with you. I'm jolly glad I invited him. There's no real harm in Maurice. He's just been irresponsible, like so many others of his generation. I shouldn't be a bit surprised if he grew out of it. By the way, what on earth do you think I found in mother's room the last time I was at the Manor—that old catapult he potted me with."

"Well, I'm blowed", said Philip. "It's not like mother to keep rubbish."

He added, after a moment's thought, "If Maurice could only find a really nice wife it might make all the difference"; and John agreed.

§ 4

Meanwhile Maurice—brothers, mother, family, everyone in the world except himself and the girl of whom he knew only the physical appearance forgotten—hailed another taxi, and was driven rapidly back to the King's Road.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-SIX

§ 1

THE occasion—it seemed to Maurice's artistic sensibilities—demanded flowers. He stopped his taxi at a florist's; bought lavishly, and was driven on in a state of mounting excitement which culminated as he reached the studio.

"Shall I help you to carry that stuff in?" asked the taxi-man.

"Thanks."

His latchkey—and it was the first time in years that he had known his hand tremulous—could hardly find the hole in the lock. Taking the three tissue-wrapped bundles, he barely glanced at the message Mrs. Milligan had left on the hall table.

"Thanks", he repeated, laying the flowers on an oak settle and handing the man his money. "Never mind about the change."

"Wish they was all like you, sir."

The man touched his hat and went out. Maurice closed the door; and carried his bundles into the little kitchen, where he unwrapped them as carefully as a woman might have done. The cheap clock told him it was ten minutes past three.

Only fifty minutes more—and she would be here.

Leaving the red roses and the purple iris and the tiger lilies where they lay, he went to the studio, and returned with his vases, washing them at the sink tap before he filled them.

His fingers were steadier by then; but they began shaking again while he was taking off his coat and waistcoat, putting on his Russian blouse. Before leaving his bedroom he inspected his appearance with even more than his usual care. Just as he gave his flaxen hair a last pat with his ivory-backed brushes, the telephone rang.

"She's not coming after all", he thought ; and rushed out into the hall.

An unknown voice asked, "Is that Mr. Maurice Carteret ?" ; said, "One moment please" ; and left him to fume. Clickings followed ; then the known croak, "Sir Godfrey Bonnington here".

His heart seemed to burst with sheer relief.

"Did you get my message ?" went on Sir Godfrey.

As usual, he lied with ease, "Well, no. I've only just come in. I suppose you're in a hurry for that toothpaste poster. It's quite ready. You can send up for it any time you like".

"Splendid. I wish all our artists were as reliable as you are."

The wire went dumb for a moment ; then the voice croaked on :

"I knew you wouldn't let me down. That was why I wanted to get in touch with you. As it happens I've got an appointment your way this afternoon. So I thought I might kill two birds with one stone, and fetch the thing myself. It'll go in the car quite easily. Expect me about a quarter to five or maybe a little earlier——"

"But——"

But Sir Godfrey had hung up.

§ 2

Maurice ripped out a foreign oath. For a second he had the impulse to call Sir Godfrey back. Blast the man, butting in at the one moment he wasn't wanted. What was the use of one's having given Mrs. Milligan the afternoon off ?

Second thoughts, nevertheless, counselled discretion. One made nearly half one's income out of Bonnington. Probably the fellow would only stay five minutes. All the same . . .

"All the same", mused Maurice, replacing the receiver, "why should he want to fetch the thing himself ? He's never done that before. He always sends a van for them." And for a moment—remembering that Sir Godfrey must have heard him make the appointment with Lina—a nebulous suspicion harried his mind.

That suspicion, and another—that Henry Bonnington had asked his cousin to play watchdog—he dismissed as absurd.

"Just coincidence", he decided. "Damned annoying. But not particularly important. We'll be able to have quite a talk before he comes anyway."

Comforted by this decision, he looked at his watch.

Time seemed to have stopped. It was still barely a quarter to four. He returned to the studio, shifted one of the vases, re-arranged the roses in another, pulled the roller blind half-over the top light, pulled it back again, lit one of his Turkish cigarettes, and—finally—unable to control his impatience any longer, went out into the courtyard.

The archway through which she must come hypnotized him. The cigarette was almost burning his moustache before his lips opened to drop it. Presently he heard a clock strike ; then another clock. Now, every noise of every passing vehicle sent the blood beating to his forehead. Now every second brought the certainty, "She won't come at all. She's thought better of it".

Three minutes past four, his watch told him. Six minutes past. Ten minutes past. A quarter past.

Nervously he lit himself another cigarette. Surely, if she had altered her mind, she'd have telephoned or written to him.

Gosh, there she was !

§ 3

The taxi had not entered the courtyard. Lina was still inside, passing the fare to her driver. With a colossal effort—after all, he'd only met the girl once in his life—Maurice controlled his impulse to run, and lounged out through the archway. The door of the taxi was open by then. She stepped out—and the full exquisite loveliness of her blinded him.

For once in his life the remembered picture of a woman was surpassed by the real.

She wore no hat. She might have been del Sarto's own Madonna, except that her eyes were larger, and her mouth more red, more passionate. All in white she was, with never a jewel, never an ornament.

Bridal. And shy.

The moment of complete illusion passed. Something of

normality returned to him. But his first words struck him as wholly banal.

"I was afraid", he heard himself say, "that you were going to be late."

She smiled at that.

"Aren't I?" she asked.

"Well, as a matter of fact, I believe you are."

They were still standing on the pavement. His dark eyes—he knew—were still staring at her. Strangely, he had no impulse to offer her his hand.

"I'm sorry." The low voice seemed to match the personality. "Does it matter?"

"Not in the least."

He realised that she was holding up her dress; that it was an evening one; that she wore gold shoes. Half-overcome by the magic of the moment, he could still think, "They oughtn't to be gold. There mustn't be any gold except in the background, and only gleams of it there".

Automatically they made their way under the archway. Automatically he said, "I'm afraid these cobbles are a bit trying"; and held the door wide open for her.

She passed through. He closed the door quietly. Without another word they went along the passage and into the studio. That door, too, he closed; and they faced each other, so closely that he could see his own image reflected in her eyes.

He sought for words then. But no words came. His lips had gone dry. The image he had seen of himself vanished. He knew that he was shaking all over; that she was backing away from him.

"So you meant it", he heard her say. "*Dios mio*, you really meant it."

"Yes."

The monosyllable hung between them. She was standing still again, one hand to her breast, the other loose at her side. Her mouth worked.

"*Dios mio*", she repeated.

He made a step towards her. She drew back once more, almost to the foot of the model throne. He knew what he

ought to do, what he would have done with any other woman. But the sheer terror in her eyes stayed him.

"What is it?" he asked.

"*Nada. Solamente—no puede ser.*"

Her very frankness baffled him. He could not co-ordinate his thoughts. He had no thoughts—only this blind urge to take her in his arms and stifle her with kisses.

"*No puede ser*", she repeated. "*Nunca. De ningun modo.*"

"*Porqué.*"

"*Porqué yo tambien . . . Y desde el primo momento . . .*"

The confession died in her throat. He heard himself stammer, "But if that's true, if you feel the same way I do, nothing can prevent us from belonging to each other".

Then the front-door bell rang, peremptorily—once, twice, and again . . .

CHAPTER SEVENTY-SEVEN

§ 1

THE front-door bell of Maurice's studio rang a fourth time before its message made any impression on the minds of the two within. And it took several more seconds before Maurice recovered his selfcontrol.

"Don't be afraid", he said—for Lina's dark eyes had registered increasing terror. "I know who that it. He won't stay long. He's only come to fetch a picture."

Her lips managed to frame the words, "He? Who?"

He told her. She laughed, almost hysterically, but made no comment.

"You'd better get up there", he went on; and the old Maurice added, "If he asks why I haven't started yet, say I've been posing you."

She nodded, stepped up to the throne. He went quickly into the passage—all his experiences warning him, "You've got to be steady now. You mustn't let him see that anything unusual has happened". And a second later, with the door open, he heard himself say :

"Awfully sorry to keep you waiting, Sir Godfrey. One doesn't hear that bell any too well with the studio door shut; and my daily woman's had to go out for an hour or two. Her husband's been taken ill. Miss Raiman's here for her sitting. I've just been trying to get the right pose for her".

"By jove", croaked Sir Godfrey. "I'd quite forgotten Lina's first appointment with you was for this afternoon."

He followed Maurice through the hall, leaving his soft hat on the table, and into the studio. Lina was sitting, stiffly, on the throne. She did not rise as they entered. Her lips crinkled to the semblance of a smile when Bonnington repeated his statement.

"That's all right, Godfrey", she said. "We haven't really started yet. Mr. Carteret was just posing me."

Her aplomb seemed perfect. Even her eyes had changed—their look as incurious as Maurice first remembered it.

"I hope you won't mind", he said, "if I show Sir Godfrey the picture he's come for."

"Why, of course not. May I see it too?"

The picture of Wanda had been turned against the wall. She rose as Maurice lifted the easel; and came slowly across the rugs while Bonnington was appraising it.

"Fine", said Sir Godfrey Bonnington. "Exactly what we want."

He stepped back; took a reducing glass from his pocket.

"We're getting out a booklet for them", he went on. "I don't see why we shouldn't use this for the cover. What colour do you think the lettering ought to be?"

"Black and red obviously."

"I wonder." Sir Godfrey scratched his reddish head. "The slogan'll have to go in too. 'Dentigloss girls, Have teeth like pearls.' Pretty neat, that."

"Very." Maurice glanced at Lina. "Do you like it, Miss Raiman?"

"Rather."

Her enthusiasm troubled him a little. The work was second rate. Surely she knew that as well as Wanda. But a faint whiff of the perfume she affected, heady at his nostrils, drowned thought in emotion; and once more her beauty enthralled him, setting his imagination on fire. Soon, Bonnington would go. Soon, they would be alone again.

But the "practitioner in advertising" stood his ground—glancing, after a few more sentences, at the china which Mrs. Milligan had set out on a brass Benares tray.

"If you haven't had tea yet", he suggested, "I wonder if I could join you for a cup. They didn't offer me any where I've been; and it's thirsty work talking to a board of directors."

Secretly cursing, Maurice plugged in the electric kettle.

"But don't let me interfere", smiled Sir Godfrey, "with the work."

He sat down and took out his cigarette case.

"I might even be able to help", he continued. "How are you going to do her? Standing or sitting?"

"I haven't quite made up my mind yet. How do you feel about it, Miss Raiman?"

"Well"—their eyes met understandingly—"I think your original idea was quite good. Shall we try it again?"

"Please."

She went to the throne, seated herself. The old Maurice began to appreciate the comedy of the situation. He stepped up beside her; cocked his head on one side; stepped back again; fetched some scarlet draperies embroidered with golden fleur-de-lis, a small oak table, the vase of red roses.

"That right hand", he said. "Just a little more forward. Don't you think you'd be more comfortable if you relaxed . . . That's better . . . Now about the head. Could you turn it a little?"

Comedy continued. He fiddled with the blind again; used the word "*Chiaroscuro*"; stood by his easel; took up a piece of charcoal, put it down, pretending himself dissatisfied with the arrangement of the draperies, changed them, restored the original ones, asking as he did so, "Don't you think I'm right, Sir Godfrey?"

Bonnington said he wasn't sure. The kettle began to sing. Lina asked, "Shall I make the tea, Mr. Carteret?" Their eyes met again before Maurice answered, "Please let me do that. I'd rather you didn't move more than necessary. We've so nearly got it right. But the position of the feet is worrying me. They don't look quite natural yet. I wonder if you could cross one ankle over the other. And might I have that skirt a wee bit higher? There!"

Again, he cocked his head on one side. Again, he stepped back—more than a little amazed that this game of pretence should have produced a result so perfect. For now, temporarily, the artist in him submerged the man.

Temporarily, he no longer wanted this woman's loveliness for himself. He wanted to make it patent for his fellow men; to make it live, eternally, on this blank canvas.

And he would. He would!

The kettle was almost boiling by then. But Maurice had forgotten it. Only a quick word from Bonnington recalled his role in the comedy—and that first nebulous suspicion, which might not be so absurd after all.

§ 2

The idea that his first suspicion—of Godfrey Bonnington's interest in Lina—might have some foundation in fact grew on Maurice while he made the tea. And, some twenty minutes later, the advertising agent's, "How long do you usually make your first sitting, Carteret? If you think you'll be through fairly soon, I might just as well stay and give the little lady a lift home", confirmed it.

But by that time the artist in him was once more submerging the man. The lines of this miraculous pose—she had resumed it naturally after a few sips at her cup—simply must be transferred to canvas. Tracing them rapidly and surely in faint pencil, he heard himself say, "I shan't be so very long now. Help yourself to a cigarette or something".

"Thanks", said Sir Godfrey, "I will."

The unwelcome visitor continued to smoke, his host to work. Every time Maurice looked up from his canvas to Lina he was struck by her complete immobility, her absolute silence. It struck him, too, that his own silence was very unusual. Customarily, he talked nineteen to the dozen while he worked on a portrait; and either whistled or sang while he was landscape painting. Such personal thoughts, however, and all others remained semi-conscious. For the first time in his life the sheer joy of his task absorbed him—till his sight seemed to fail and he came to himself to hear rain pattering on the skylight.

Only then did that power of concentration—which, constantly cultivated by self-discipline, makes the true artist—desert him, leaving him the mere mortal, prey to his own carnal desires.

And because Maurice had never bridled those desires, he could only just contain himself when Bonnington said, "So that's the end of it, eh?"

"Yes", he admitted. "I can't very well go on by this light."

Sir Godfrey rose.

"One may see what you've done, I suppose", he said.

Deliberately Maurice put his back to the easel.

"If you don't mind, I'd much rather not."

There was some hostility in the artist's voice, more in his look. But the advertising agent's cultivated *bonhomie* did not desert him.

"You painters", he croaked, "are always a bit on the temperamental side. How about packing up *my* picture. Oughtn't it to have something over it?"

Maurice's mind acted quickly. He forced a smile, saying, "I've got some sacking somewhere or other. Your chauffeur can drive right up to the door, you know".

"I—er—didn't bring my chauffeur", said Sir Godfrey; and Maurice, glancing at Lina, now on her feet, saw her mouth harden.

On that, his suspicion became certainty. No accident, no coincidence, had brought this man here today. And Lina knew it.

Rage had him as certainty stabbed home.

He turned; walked away from them; stooped and rummaged in the big corner cupboard for his sacking. His temper was almost out of control by then. Lina and Sir Godfrey were talking. But their words, "Henry's away, isn't he?": "No. He changed his mind about going to Manchester": "How like him!", hardly penetrated to his mind.

Upright again, the pink mist clotted here and there with scarlet corpuscles rose, just for the fraction of a second, between him and Lina.

He could kill for this woman. He would kill, rather than lose this woman. Then the mist cleared; and he heard his own voice, altogether the actor's, asking, "Will you be able to manage another sitting tomorrow, Miss Raiman?"

The actress in her responded instantly:

"Yes. At least I think so. What time would suit you?"

"Could you manage the morning?"

"I'm afraid"—she seemed to hesitate—"that the morning is always a little difficult for me. I have my shopping to do."

"Shall we make it four o'clock again then?"

"Yes. And I really will try to be punctual."

He dropped the sacking over Wanda's picture; lifted it from its stand.

"Perhaps you could be getting your car up to the door, Sir Godfrey?" he suggested. "It seems to be raining harder than ever."

Bonnington dallied a palpable second with his, "Good scheme, Carteret"; then he moved to the door, held it open.

Perforce, they followed him into the passage. Alone with Lina after Bonnington had run out to his car, something made Maurice whisper:

"So they're both in love with you".

She pretended not to hear.

"*Hasta la vista*", she smiled, holding out her hand; then, her eyes no longer incurious:

"*Mañana. A las cuatro*".

And she in her turn whispered:

"He will not dare come tomorrow. He is only a silly old man. I am not afraid of him, or of the other".

"Then what are you afraid of?"

Their hands were still together. Her fingers gripped his convulsively.

"Of loving you too much, *amigo mio*."

Their hands separated.

Moments later, he heard the car splatter away.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-EIGHT

§ 1

OUTSIDE, Barcelona sweltered in the August heat. Through the open windows of this high room, one heard the clang of the tram bells, the ceaseless come and go of humanity along the Ramblas.

But Lina still slept, heavily, her face to the wall, her dark head pillowed on one bare arm.

Presently, turning away from her, Maurice slept too.

Or was one really asleep? Were not these dreams reality?

Yes. Reality. This lovely creature was one's wife.

§ 2

The certainty that he had married Lina—that she lay on this same bed, in this very room—seemed to waken Maurice. It seemed to him that he had turned to her again; that he was holding her close to him, crushing her red flower of a mouth to his own.

Then it seemed as though that mouth whispered, "*No puede ser, amigo*"; and abruptly they were no longer man and wife, they were no longer even lovers . . .

For now, though Maurice's dreams were still reality, they only showed him the past. And in that past he seemed to see Sir Godfrey's motor car splattering away through the sudden rain storm of a London afternoon.

The rain stopped while he was still standing at the door of his studio. Queerly, as a man may in dreams, he knew that a whole evening, a whole night, the best part of a day had gone by since their first sitting; and that, in another minute, Lina would be with him again.

Then the studio door had closed on them; and the perfume

of her was heady in his nostrils, her beauty blinding him, as he asked, "Why should you be afraid of loving me too much?"

But again the woman his mind was recreating for him did not answer his question. She only smiled at him, and seated herself on the model throne.

"Paint", she said. "Paint!"

And in his dream—for this was the core of the dream—Maurice saw the picture of her taking shape, taking colour, almost taking life on his canvas.

Until, even through the dream, penetrated one conscious thought, "This isn't true. Pictures aren't made like this"; and, dimly, he heard the clanging of a bell, glimpsed sunlight through the jalousies of this other room.

He did turn over then; but conscious thought was gone before his arm encircled Lina; and once more he saw his picture, finished.

She had stepped down from the throne. She was looking at her own picture.

"Do you like it?" he was asking.

"Rather."

"But you like me better?"

"Silly. Of course I do, *amigo*."

"Then why haven't we ever—cheated?"

"Only because *you* wouldn't."

"I tell you I can't. I tell you I don't want you that way, Lina. It's got to be all, or nothing. You've got to choose between me and Bonnington."

"But I have. I love you."

"Then leave him. Marry me."

"Leave him, yes. Marry you, no. Never."

"Why not?"

But again the woman Maurice's mind was recreating did not answer his question. She only put out her hands; and suddenly he was holding those hands, kneeling to her, imploring her:

"Lina, for God's sake, listen to me. I know what you're thinking. But it doesn't matter. It wasn't your fault. You were so young. You didn't know what that sort of life meant.

I'm going to take you out of it. I'm going to make you forget it. As my wife——"

Once more conscious thought penetrated to the dreamer's mind. This woman who still slept was his wife. She would never go back to Bonnington, or to that other place, into which she had been as good as sold by her own mother . . .

By her own mother. The pity of it. No wonder if she . . .

But that wasn't true. He had only dreamed it. He was in the studio again, still kneeling to her, still holding both her hands.

"I don't understand", he heard himself say. "If you're willing to leave Bonnington, if you're willing to come here and live with me, why won't you marry me?"

"Because I do love you too much. Because it wouldn't be fair. Because I'm rotten. Because I should ruin you."

"Nonsense. You're not rotten. You wouldn't ruin me. You'd be the making of me."

She was weakening. He could feel the strength go out of her hands. They no longer resisted. He had them at his lips. He had risen. He was standing over her, bending to her, laughing down at her :

"*Tonta*. Silly. Why all the scruples? You've told me everything. And I don't care. I swear to you, I don't care. Do you imagine I've been so good myself? Do you think I've any right to sit in judgment?"

"But Maurice——"

"No. I won't listen any more. Kiss me. Give me your word."

"The word of a——"

"Don't say that, Lina."

"Other people will."

"Let them. I love you. I adore you. I would give my life for you. Kiss me. Promise me. Stay with me."

And she had promised. She had stayed.

§ 3

For a while no more of those words spoken on the day when Lina had first given herself to him echoed through Maurice's dream. For a while the pictures her confession had created

in his imagination remained static—like fragments cut from a film.

He saw her as a child, dancing up and down a mean street in the slums of Buenos Aires. He saw her mongrel of a father—brutal, debased, beating her when the drink bade him. He saw her mother—avaricious; cruel also, though more sparing of the whip. He saw her dancing again, still only a child, in a spangled skirt and white cotton stockings; the gross men who applauded her, who took her on their knees and gave her wine . . .

Then that sheer horror we only know in sleep blotted out many pictures; so that the next one he saw was the face of Henry Bonnington. And now, once again, she spoke:

"He was good to me—though for his own purposes. He paid the money. He took me away from that place. He brought me to England. So you must not hate him too much".

Yet in this dream Maurice still hated Henry Bonnington; could still feel the urge to take him by the fat throat against which he had fought while he faced the man, in that room at his house, to tell him:

"Lina's with me. She's been with me since yesterday. She's not coming back to you. She wants nothing more from you. Keep the clothes you gave her, the jewellery, everything".

And now his dream menaced with Henry Bonnington's own voice:

"In your own estimation, I've no doubt, you're behaving like a fine chivalrous fellow. But I say you're a thief . . . It serves me right, I suppose. I oughtn't to have trusted either of you . . . But don't make any mistake, Carteret. She'll end by letting you down, just as she's ended by letting me down . . . You don't know as much about her as I do, but you will one day. And now you can get out . . . I don't know why you came, unless you're after the money I promised to pay you for her picture".

The fool. Did he really imagine one would part with that picture, with one's masterpiece, for any money he could pay, or his cousin either?

For now, abruptly, Maurice's sleeping mind showed him a different room and a different face, bushy of reddish eyebrow, smiling—though even his sleeping mind could read the menace under that smile :

"I'm a man of the world, Carteret. That's why I asked you to come and have a chat. Henry's got a lot of shares in this business, you see. And, after all, blood is thicker than water. So that you can't very well expect any more commissions from us. That would be just a little too much to expect, wouldn't it?"

And in his dream, as not in reality, Maurice answered :

"That's a lie. And you know it as well as I do. You wanted her yourself. You only arranged for me to paint her, so that you could drive her back from the studio that afternoon ; so that you could have at least the one opportunity of being alone with her".

Because in reality he had been just as big a liar as Henry's cousin, smiling back at him :

"Very decent of you to send for me, Sir Godfrey. The position is a little delicate. But don't let it worry you. It doesn't worry me, you see. Because I don't really want to do any more commercial work, even for Bonningtons".

And, taking the hand Sir Godfrey offered so reluctantly, he had said :

"In the circumstances, I suppose you'd rather not be invited to the wedding".

The dream echoed Sir Godfrey's answer, "Wedding ! You don't mean to say you're actually going to marry her", before it changed . . .

§ 4

Outside, the August heat grew fiercer, and the ceaseless come and go of humanity thickened past the flower booths of the Ramblas. For already midday had chimed from Barcelona Cathedral.

But within this high room Maurice Carteret still slept, heavily, one arm encircling the woman with her face to the wall.

Vaguely, just for the one fleeting second, he knew this ;

and again, just for one other fleeting second, that sheer horror which haunts the mind in sleep.

Then horror receded ; and suddenly, in his dream, it was raining once more. But this rain, he understood, would not last long. He could see the sun shining through clouds ; and out of that sunshine—he further understood—would come his mother, a little surprised, a little on her guard, to say :

"I thought I'd walk as far as the lodge gates to meet you. What's the great secret, my dear ? Why have I simply got to motor back to London with you ?"

And how his mother's eyes would stare at him as she asked, "But who is she, Maurice ? And why this violent hurry to marry her ?"

Then, in his dream, she had asked that ; and he had answered her, lightly, "Don't be so feudal, darling. I'm far too much in love to answer a lot of questions. But I simply couldn't get married without your being there. And John must be there too. You've got to make him. That's why I came myself, instead of writing".

And here was Laura saying, "I'm so glad. I do hope you'll be happy" ; there was Laura, waving from the terrace, as he drove his mother away from the Manor, as she chided :

"You're always so impulsive. Are you sure you're being wise ? You don't seem to know very much about her".

"I know that we're in love with each other, darling. And that it's made all the difference to me. You wait till you see how I'm painting. I've done a picture of her. We'll stop at the studio for a minute. I'll show it you."

Even in his dream he felt how cunning he had been not to keep Lina at the studio, to make her take a room at a hotel for this one night. But even in his dream he could feel the embarrassment he had experienced when Charlotte, standing before Lina's picture, smiled :

"A little idealised, perhaps. But otherwise an excellent likeness. I understand, now, why you found it a little difficult to tell me who she was. It's lucky you're a painter and not a doctor, isn't it ?"

Subtle, his mother. But in the dream scene, as in the real,

all that was genuine in him had overreached her subtlety, putting his arm round her, coaxing her :

"Why do you always pretend to be so hard, darling? Do you think I should want you and John to be there tomorrow if Lina weren't . . . everything that she ought to be? Do you really think I'd be getting married at all if I wasn't in the most frightful earnest, if I didn't know that we really were going to make each other happy".

And in the dream scene, as in the real, his mother answered, after a long pause during which she looked at him very thoughtfully :

"She's certainly made a difference to you, Maurice. I've never known you put anyone of my sex on a pedestal before. So I think I'll . . . accept her".

John, too, had accepted Lina : so that his words also, "Bit of a surprise, old chap. But of course I'll come to the wedding. And I hope you'll be jolly happy", echoed through Maurice's sleeping mind as it re-lived its own ecstasy, as the dream pictures flashed fast and faster across that screenboard which is memory.

Faster.

And faster.

Yet every picture clear.

It was the same night. He was fetching Lina from her hotel. He was laughing at her, "It's all right, my sweet. They won't eat you". He was introducing her to John and Charlotte. They were dining together, drinking the champagne he had ordered. He could see, by their faces, how much his mother was being impressed, how much even John had been impressed, by Lina's beauty.

And now that night had gone over, now Mrs. Milligan was waking him. Mrs. Milligan gave him a letter. He could actually see some of the words of that letter, "After you left us . . . Wedding present . . . This cheque . . . Mother and I . . . We didn't like to ask you in front of her . . . Of course we know you're doing very well. . . . But money's always useful".

Faster.

And faster.

And faster.

Yet every picture still clear, even down to the wording on that cheque, "Pay Maurice Carteret five hundred pounds", even down to the little cut his razor had made on his chin, and that one strand of dark hair he had patted back from Lina's ear as they drove to the church.

And there stood the actual church, with his mother and John waiting under the porch of it. Only—why was the spire of that church leaning, toppling, falling? Why had the sun gone out? What had happened to his dream?

This was no dream. This was death. Death from a great height. He could feel himself falling—out of immeasurable skies into an immeasurable nothingness.

Death. If he ceased to fall. If he couldn't wrench himself awake.

He must wake. He must . . .

Otherwise . . .

CHAPTER SEVENTY-NINE

§ 1

. . . THAT nightmare of a fall had been so vivid that—for a full second—Maurice could hardly believe himself alive. He could still feel his heart thumping as he lay on his back, eyes wide open. Where was he? In what strange room?

But in another second his mind seemed all too clear.

Slowly, carefully, he turned on his right side. Slowly, he climbed out of bed and stood staring at Lina, who had not moved.

Next, he looked at his watch, there, on the bedside table. Nearly one o'clock. Should he wake her? No. Better not.

His slippers were at his feet. But on these bare boards they would make a noise. The bathroom door still stood ajar. He tiptoed through; filled one of the toothglasses with water; drank; refilled the glass; drank again; looked at himself in the mirror; saw the fear in his own eyes.

Presently he returned to the bedroom. Lina's frock, her underclothes, her shoes and stockings lay orderly on the hard sofa. He remembered arranging them like that; remembered undressing her; helping her into her pyjamas; telling her, "A bit squiffy. You'll be all right once you're in bed, my poppet".

How she had laughed. How he himself had laughed. A bit squiffy. Both of them. That last bottle of Rioja, that last Domecq brandy. He oughtn't to have ordered that last bottle. He oughtn't to have insisted she must drink her share.

And yet, if he hadn't insisted, if he hadn't been a little quicker than usual in the bathroom, he would never have known, he would never have seen . . .

Did she know that he had seen? Should he tell her?

O God, what *was* he to do?

§ 2

Slowly, carefully, Maurice re-arranged the clothes on the sofa ; lowered himself on to the space he had cleared ; buried his head in his damp hands.

His head ached. He could hardly reconstruct the overnight happenings—their drive out of the city, their dinner under the palm trees by the moonlit sea. At her gayest, Lina had been all through that dinner. And on their way back to Barcelona she had suggested they stop for a while.

He remembered the little walk they had taken, the scent of the flowers, her eyes shining in the darkness as he caught her to him, as he kissed her and kissed her. He remembered the very words he had used ; and her answer, "Crazy boy. *Tonto*. As though we weren't married" ; and teasing her, "Suppose I insist".

But of course he hadn't insisted ; though he had pretended to be cross with her. He had only picked her up in his arms and carried her back to his car . . .

A faint moan made him lift his head from his hands. He sat rigid. Was she awake, or just dreaming ?

Dreaming. Another tiny moan—and she lay quiet again, her face still to the wall. Dare he risk a cigarette ? No. The noise of the match might wake her. And he didn't want her to wake up—she mustn't wake up—until he had come to some decision.

O God, what *was* he to do ?

§ 3

Sure that Lina still slept, Maurice let his hands blot out the picture of her. But he was still aware of the sunlight through the jalousies, of the tram bells clanging—and of his fear.

Fear showed him their return to Barcelona, her face, pouting a little, as she protested, "But I don't want to go to bed yet. It's such a lovely night. Take me somewhere gay". Fear made him re-live those minutes while he waited for her.

"I shan't be long, sweet", she had said. "But I must just run upstairs and powder my nose." And how happy she had

seemed—happier, merrier than he had ever known her—when the night porter helped her back into the car.

It was the porter who had told them how to find that all-night café music-hall. And what fun they had had there. How she had crowed over him because—“And you such a linguist, *querido*”—he had hardly understood a word of the Madrid patois, and not a single word of those Catalan songs.

And after the show was over they had danced the maddest dances—rumbas and bailes and a double gitanela that was new to him.

So madly happy, he had been—dancing with Lina, drinking with Lina, listening to those gipsy songs with his arm round Lina’s shoulders. Supposing they did get a little squiffy just for this once, what did it matter?

He remembered himself saying that, and forcing more wine on her, and teasing her again, “You’ll be all right, my pet. Your little Maurice will take care of you. He’ll undress you and put you to bed. And put a cold sponge on your face in the morning”.

Little Maurice, indeed. The big bloody fool, with all his experience, not to have known, not to have guessed . . . But one might never have known, one might never have guessed . . . Even now one couldn’t be quite certain . . . When a chap was drunk himself . . . And he had been more than a little drunk—he couldn’t remember driving his car into the garage . . .

But he’d sobered up all right while he was helping Lina to undress. And she hadn’t really needed his help. She hadn’t been as tipsy as all that. Otherwise she would never have protested, “As though I really needed a maid . . .”

Besides, she’d walked to that bed. He’d seen her safely asleep on it before he went to the bathroom.

Asleep? No. Just pretending to be asleep. So that she could get rid of him. So that she could be alone in the bedroom for long enough, for long enough . . .

O God, what *was* he to do? He must make certain, absolutely certain, that he hadn’t been drunk, that he hadn’t been dreaming; that he had left the bathroom door ajar; that he had seen, in the mirror over the basin, Lina . .

creeping out of bed . . . creeping towards her dressing case . . . unlocking the case . . . taking out that bottle . . . shaking out that pinch of powder . . . sniffing up that powder.

Damn it, he would make certain. The keys were still in the dressing case. He had only to open it.

But the creak of the sofa woke her; and just as he put his hand to the key she had turned over, she was stretching herself, as a cat stretches itself.

"Darling", she said. Then, quickly, leaping out of bed :

"Que haces? Que buscas?"

"Nothing", said Maurice, stupidly.

For a second, she stood tense. Then, very slowly, she came towards him, almost as a sleepwalker comes. But her eyes were wide open, their pupils contracted to pin points, and in those eyes he guessed a fear that matched and over-matched his own.

"You *were* looking for something", she went on. "You must have seen me last night. But there isn't any more left. I swear there isn't. That was the very last of it. I haven't taken any since you married me. I'll never take any again. I swear I won't. O Maurice, please, please believe me."

Still stupid he asked, "But why did you take it last night?"

"I don't know. Yes, I do. Only I don't like to tell you. You may be angry. That place we went to reminded me of . . . that other place. I was so unhappy. I began to think . . . *Querido*, I'm so thirsty. Fetch me some water. Just a little drop of water."

He went to the bathroom again. When he came back she was seated on the bed, one hand behind her, the other shading her eyes.

"I'm so ashamed of myself", she said. "But it shall never happen again. Never."

The glass clinked against her teeth, spilling a few drops on her blue silk pyjama-coat. She began to sob. Pity took him by the throat. He put an arm round her.

"Don't cry, Lina."

She spoke through her tears: "It wouldn't matter if I didn't love you so much. It wouldn't matter if I hadn't married

you. *Madonna mia*, why couldn't I love you more? Why wasn't I strong enough not to marry you? I'm rotten, Maurice. I tell you, I'm rotten."

"No. No."

He held her closer. Slowly the tears subsided. Her right hand began to fondle him; her left lay flaccid on her knee.

"My wedding ring", she said. "I was so proud of it. Now I've dishonoured it. And you. How can you go on loving me after this? And I need your love so. I'd rather die than lose you. You're—you're so beautiful, Maurice. Forgive me. Please, please forgive me."

And suddenly she had broken from him, had flung herself on her knees to him, resting her bent head on his lap.

For a second, as his fingers rested on that shining hair, all the experience in Maurice doubted her. Then passion banished doubt; and, quickly, stooping over her, he raised her, held her at arms' length from him, looking her steadily between the eyes.

The pupils of her eyes dilated. He saw his own image there. And abruptly that image turned all heroic; abruptly he was Saint George again, vowed to save this lovely creature from this new dragon.

Or was this new dragon already slain? She had said so. She had sworn to it. So why not believe her? So much easier to believe her, to demonstrate one's trust in her. Besides, it had been his own fault. He should never have made her drink so much wine. He should never have taken her to that place, which had reminded her . . .

He was still holding her at arms' length. He was still looking her between the eyes. Surely truth shone from those lovely eyes. Surely they had read his inmost thoughts as they widened and widened, as she murmured:

"Never again. As the Madonna is my witness. Believe me. Forgive me".

And suddenly he had caught her to him, crushed her to him, madly, feverishly, every desire of his body strengthening the selfdelusion in his mind.

"Sweetheart", he heard himself murmur. "Only woman. I love you so. I adore you so. There's nothing to forgive. It was my fault as much as yours."

Her fever answered his. For a while there was no more need for words between them; and when they spoke again they spoke quietly, reasonably, happily.

"We won't stay in Barcelona after today", laughed Maurice. "No more late nights. No more racketing about. I want to start painting again."

Lina laughed back, "Where are you going to take me next? Ronda or Granada?"

§ 4

Maurice and Lina motored four leisurely days, westward along the coast, by Tarragona and Castellon de la Plana, by Valencia and Alicante and Almeria, before they took the mountain road to Granada. And there they stayed, very happily, for a whole month.

The Alhambra—Maurice said—had been "painted to death". So he would "do" the Generalife instead. He used to work there all the morning; and Lina would sit beside him, watching every brush stroke, watching blue skies and gray walls and dark trees and the blaze of a flower bed take shape under his hand.

Afterwards they would wander, arm in arm, down the hill to their hotel, and lunch leisurely with a huge bowl of muscats for the inevitable dessert, and take their siesta Spanish-fashion.

Then he would go to his painting again, "Because I simply must catch the evening light, darling". And later they used to watch, from their high terrace, the flames of the burning stubble leap red against the darkness across the plain below.

Those flames fascinated Maurice. Time and again he tried to transfer the impression they made on him to a canvas.

"But I'm no impressionist", he used to laugh. "I can only paint what I see, not what I feel."

Nevertheless, because he was painting better landscapes than he had ever painted in his life—or would ever paint again—he could hardly bring himself to leave Granada. And after Granada, he must show her Ciudad Real, and Toledo, and the Escorial, and Madrid.

"Once I get away from England", he told her as they drove

north after three nights in Madrid, "I never really want to go back there. So what do you say to a month or so in Paris?"

As luck would have it, Maurice, strolling down the Rue de la Paix in Paris, met an English dealer he knew, and brought him back to their hotel, and sold him—"for a couple of hundred, my angel"—the four best pictures of the Generalife. And, by even greater luck, the man who had taken his old studio on the Left Bank—also met strolling—wanted to spend the winter in Rome.

"So it's ours if we care to move in", grinned Maurice.

They moved in on a bright November afternoon, and gave a party soon afterwards. Lina was at her very gayest that night. But she wouldn't touch even one glass of champagne.

"I've had my lesson", she laughed when he remonstrated with her. "No more wine. No more brandy. Just a little vin ordinaire with my meals. But I only drink that to keep you company, my pet one."

To that decision, she adhered. He loved her all the more for it. And of her absolute fidelity to him—in thought, word and deed—he never had any doubts at all.

"She's been the making of me", he wrote to Charlotte that Christmas.

§ 5

For it was not until the New Year's morning, after yet another party, that Maurice stretched out a sleepy hand, and wondered why Lina should not be beside him, and opened his eyes to see her standing at the dressing table.

She had a little screw of paper between her fingers. He watched her open it. He could not see her put the paper to her nose. But he could hear her sniffing up the cocaine.

"A woman gave it me", she lied that time. "It was only the tiniest mite. But somehow I couldn't resist just trying it once more. I don't really care for it, though. Honestly I don't. So there's nothing for you to worry about."

He pretended to believe her.

What else was there—O God, what else was there—loving her as he did, with all the best and all the worst in him—for a man to do?

CHAPTER EIGHTY

§ 1

DWIGHT MANSFIELD had insisted that she must stay with him, Aurelia and Elizabeth at the Ritz instead of occupying her usual room at Herbert's. Charlotte, tidying herself for luncheon, could not avoid the thought, "How extravagant of him".

But, then, since his father's death, her son-in-law must be "simply rolling". Lucky man!

A knock disturbed her. A page boy came in with more flowers. She rang for the chambermaid; asked her to fetch a vase; arranged the roses herself. This further attention touched her. For a little, she let herself sentimentalise. Middle age, when one had a family, was the happiest age. Nothing to worry about—except that John really ought to get married again.

No use worrying about that either. After all John was still a young man. He wouldn't be forty till next year.

The telephone rang, and she heard his voice, while she was still thinking about him. Would it matter—he asked—if he didn't turn up till after lunch? Would she make his excuses to Dwight?

Typical, that. He could just as easily have spoken to Dwight himself. But he never missed an opportunity of having a chat with her. Every week end, he came to the Manor.

They were so close to each other nowadays.

Too close! There ought to be some other woman in his life. A real woman. Not just a mother. John needed that—to round off his character, to mellow him. Not that he would make a very exciting husband.

If she were a girl, she would far rather be married to Maurice.

The thought surprised her. Latterly, however, all her

thoughts about Maurice had been surprising ones. She had never believed that characters could alter, only that they developed. Maurice, apparently, was the one exception to the rule. Who would have imagined him—of all people—writing a regular weekly letter, or painting “the picture of the year”?

§ 2

The telephone rang again. Answering it, Charlotte heard Aurelia. Could she come along to the sitting room for a moment, and give her opinion about a dog Aurelia wanted to take back for Mercy.

“The man’s brought six along for me to choose from, and they all look alike.”

Laughing—nobody but Aurelia would have asked one of the best-known breeders to send half a dozen bullterriers to a hotel—Charlotte went along the corridor. The dogs were in the custody of a kennelman and his boy. The kennelman’s face seemed strangely familiar. While she was wondering about this, he said :

“If you’ll excuse me for saying so, m’lady, you haven’t altered as much as Mrs. Vansuythen. I shouldn’t have recognised her—though I did seem to remember the name—if you hadn’t come in too”.

Then his eyes nearly popped out of his head as Dwight came through the doorway ; and into Charlotte’s mind flashed a memory, of a white coat just seen by the light of a lamp on a tiller platform, and the very voice she had just heard so respectful saying, with a queer note of command under the respect, “M’lady, I can’t do that. It’s too dangerous. We’ve hardly room for another”.

“Jenkins !” she said, and held out her hand to him. But it was Aurelia who remembered Mary Steevens (“Why yes, ma’am. We got married all right, and a better wife a man couldn’t wish for”) and Dwight who insisted on ordering the whiskey.

“If it hadn’t been for you”, said Dwight, pulling out his wallet while the dogs tugged at their chains in the corridor, “we mightn’t any of us be here.”

§ 3

Dwight repeated that statement when he returned to the sitting room, and Charlotte did not contradict him. Yet while they were still waiting for Elizabeth, other memories flashed through her mind; and she could not help thinking, as always more constantly with increasing years, of the man who had been her husband.

Not a very exciting husband. But what a gallant gentleman.

Then Dwight corrected himself, "I guess I exaggerated a bit. I didn't owe my life to Jenkins anyway"; and she snapped at him, "We seem to be indulging in a perfect orgy of sentimentalism. What's happened to that daughter of mine? Does she always keep you waiting for your meals like this?"

"Don't blame me, mother", answered Elizabeth from the opening door. "I could have bought up half Bergdorf Goodmans in the time it's taken me to have one fitting at that dressmaker you recommended me to. Twenty solid minutes I had to wait until they even knew I was there. What's the matter with everybody in this country?"

The two voices might have been one. But even Dwight Mansfield's affection admitted—as he followed the three women to the lift—that Charlotte, within two years of sixty, still outshone her daughter.

And Elizabeth knew that, too.

§ 4

"Mother really is marvellous", mused Elizabeth, seating herself with her back to the light and studying the menu. "And it isn't as if she ever took any trouble with herself. She's lucky. She's not emotional. She never worries about things like I do. The only time I ever saw her really stirred up was when I first told her I was in love with Dwight."

But, on that, suddenly the scene in the classroom at Miss Hornibrook's seemed more than a lifetime ago; and this mother of hers almost a stranger.

"I don't believe I could open up to her nowadays", she decided, "even if I tried."

The decision proved faintly depressing. To drive it away, she began to chatter her hardest.

"Honorias getting married in the autumn", she said. "We wanted her and her fiancé to make the trip with us. But he couldn't get away for so long; and she's gone crazy about flying. Dwight's going to build them a house."

"On my land", interposed Aurelia. "And isn't that another coincidence?"

"Why?" Charlotte put the question.

"Because it usen't to be Vansuythen land. Don't you remember? You ought to. Your John sold it to us."

Again Charlotte was haunted by the memory of a voice, her husband's, saying, "I don't see the point of keeping that property in America. It's only about two hundred acres. I think I'll let Vansuythen have it. There'll be a lot of papers to sign. Why shouldn't we go back with them? I feel a fortnight on the sea would do us both good".

Elizabeth continued talkative, Aurelia concentrated on her food, Dwight confined himself to an occasional remark—while she continued to meditate on the strangeness of fate.

"We make such a lot of fuss trying to arrange our lives", she thought. "And what's the good of it? If Cornelius hadn't wanted that land, we should never have taken the ship. If we hadn't taken the ship, Dwight would have been drowned. Now he's going to build a house for his daughter—my granddaughter—on those very two hundred acres."

And again it was in her to sentimentalise, till the conversation of the two men at the next table made her prick up her ears. For one of those men had just used the name "Carteret"; and the other had answered:

"You needn't say it so scornfully, Sir Godfrey. I know what you're thinking about. The poster work he used to do. But believe me 'Woman in White' is the best picture I've seen for the last ten years. And he's every bit as good at landscape as he is at portraiture".

Then the man addressed as "Sir Godfrey" caught her eye; she recognised him; and a moment later he had risen, was claiming acquaintance.

"My name's Bonnington", he said, holding out his hand.

"We met at your son's studio last year. Funnily enough, my friend and I were just talking about him."

Perforce, she introduced Sir Godfrey to Elizabeth and Dwight. Their coffee was just being served. Dwight said, "Won't you and your friend join us?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, we were just going."

But Dwight persisted; and presently Sir Godfrey's friend was telling them:

"No. I'm not an art dealer. I'm merely a collector. And one of the reasons why I'm so interested"—he turned a pair of sharp eyes, set close together in a slightly oriental face, on Charlotte—"in your son, is that I've just acquired six canvases he did in Granada last year. A nice price I had to pay too. Not that I've anyone to blame but myself".

"How was that?" asked Dwight.

"Publicity!" put in Sir Godfrey. "If he'd bought before Carteret made such a success with his Academy picture, he could have had them for a quarter the price. You've seen that picture I suppose, Mr. Mansfield."

"Why no. We only got in the day before yesterday."

"Well, don't miss it whatever you do", said Sir Godfrey's friend. "I only wish I could afford the money he wants. Fifteen hundred pounds if you please. And he's not open to an offer—because I wrote and asked him. The lady's his wife. You knew that, I suppose, Sir Godfrey?"

Bonnington's prawn-like eyebrows twitched. Charlotte saw that the conversation was distasteful to him; and in another moment or so he made his excuses, just missing John, who arrived full of apologies to hear Elizabeth say, "You must be very proud of our Maurice, mother".

"We both are", smiled John.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-ONE

§ 1

JOHN kissed his mother a trifle awkwardly and sat down.

He asked Elizabeth after her children. She asked after Johnny.

"Oh, he's a great lad. In the first eleven this term. He's good at work, too. Much better than I used to be."

"What are you going to do with him when he grows up?"

"We're not quite certain yet."

"We", thought Charlotte; and once more—Maurice forgotten—she fell to considering the relationship between her and her eldest son.

They were so much more to each other, nowadays, than the ordinary mother and the ordinary son. They had no secrets from each other. Barring always that one secret which she could not confide—even to him!

He was still talking of Johnny. (If he weren't careful, he might grow into rather a bore about Johnny!) Withdrawing herself from the conversation, she remembered Maurice again. How wise she had been never to take herself too much to task about Maurice. And to keep her secret. How gently the years had treated her. Maurice might have been such a trouble. Instead he had become a credit to the family.

Delicious thought.

Taking part in the conversation again, vetoing Aurelia's, "If your Johnny's so fond of dogs, why shouldn't I send him one of those bullterriers?" with a terse, "You'll do nothing of the kind. He's quite spoiled enough already", she let the thought elaborate itself.

One day, Maurice would be world-famous. One day, the name of Carteret would rank with names like Sargent, Reynolds, Gainsborough. And all because she, his mother . . .

But the very irony of this conclusion frightened her. Her mind shied away from it. Maurice was successful. He had made a happy marriage.

Leave it at that.

§ 2

The restaurant was almost empty before John said, "I'm afraid I must be toddling now. Don't forget you're all dining with me at the House this evening", and rose from the table.

"You'd never think he was minus half a leg", commented Elizabeth, watching him make for the doorway. "And he dresses almost as well as Philip. How did you manage that, mother?"

"Nagging him", laughed Charlotte.

"I nag Dwight occasionally, don't I, sweetheart?"

"Occasionally!" Dwight's eyes twinkled behind their horn-rimmed spectacles.

"Oh well, it does you good."

They continued to spat while he took out his wallet and settled his bill. Aurelia said, "I'm going to take a nap till tea time. Then I must write and tell Mercy we're bringing the dog back with us instead of shipping it direct. I must tell her about Jenkins, too. She'll be so interested".

She went. Dwight made to light a fresh cigar. Elizabeth reproved him:

"We're going to see Maurice's picture. You can't smoke in the Academy".

"You observe", smiled Dwight to Charlotte, "how well she's got me trained."

He put the cigar back in his case; and went for his hat without another word.

"I think I'll rest too", said Charlotte as they followed him out of the room. But again Elizabeth, coaxing, "Oh, do come with us", prevailed.

"Managing woman", mused Charlotte, while they were tidying themselves. "Gets that from me, I suppose." Aloud she asked, "When, exactly, is Honoria getting married?"

"The end of October or the beginning of November."

"Do you like the young man?"

Elizabeth hesitated.

"Dwight does", she said at last. "And they're in love with each other. So it's no use my interfering."

"You taught me that", she added; and something of comradeship came to them as she smiled.

They joined Dwight in the hall; and strolled out under the arcade. He took his wife's arm, steered her across Piccadilly. There, they encountered an American of their acquaintance. As she listened to the talk, Charlotte's thoughts went to Maurice again. One would have imagined that this success would bring him to England. Queer, that he and his wife should prefer Paris. It would be nice to have them at the Manor. Still, Maurice had promised that they would come, "In August perhaps. I'd like to see that kid of John's again. He'll be home for his holidays then".

Soon, Maurice ought to be having a child of his own!

§ 3

The American lifted his hat and climbed into a taxi. Charlotte, Elizabeth and Dwight strolled on through the July sunshine turned into the courtyard of Burlington House, and made their way up the flat staircase. Dwight noticed that the commissioner on duty at the turnstile wore a Military Cross with his other medals; and exchanged a few sentences with him.

"My brother-in-law's got one of those", he said. "That's how I came to recognise it."

Meanwhile Charlotte was remembering this place as she had seen it—"I'm sending you a ticket, darling, so you simply must go", Maurice had written—on the day of the Private View.

The rooms had been packed, that day. But even the people who "only came to see each other"—as John, who accompanied her, phrased it—had ceased their chattering for Maurice's "Woman in White".

And today—though there was no crowd—the picture still exercised the same curious attraction. The few who had

gathered round it made no comments. Their admiration was all in their eyes ; and as, one by one, they turned away, it seemed to Charlotte that they did so reluctantly.

"Hypnotizes them", she thought ; and Elizabeth, also, after that first, "Is this it?" stood spellbound, making her mother strangely proud.

She was much prouder today—Charlotte realised—than on that other. Because today, as not at the Private View, all her artistic sensibilities informed her that this work of Maurice's was something more than a seven-days' wonder, that the "publicity", of which Godfrey Bonnington had spoken with such awe, had at least been deserved.

Yet, mingled with her pride, she experienced a twinge of fear, and just for a moment the strangest certainty that, however well Maurice might paint in the future, this would represent the high watermark of his achievements.

Then both the fear and that strange certainty passed from her as she, too, yielded to the spell of the beauty Maurice had seen in Lina while all that was best in him still paid homage to all that was best in her.

This, her third sight of that pale face, that raven-dark hair and that exquisite white-clad body posed against the scarlet and golden draperies, seemed to give Charlotte a new understanding of her wayward son. Weak he might have been, careless he might have been, but the essence of him must be pure. And now, thanks to his love for this woman, that essence had been released, to do good in the world instead of harm.

"Beauty must do good", she thought ; but the unaccustomed exaltation suffered its reaction in an ironical, "Just because he happens to be your son" ; and the spell broke.

Dwight and Elizabeth continued to examine the picture. Still chiding herself for the spiritual disturbance, Charlotte turned away, walked to the big sofa in the middle of the room, sat down there. Presently her daughter joined her, saying, "I think it's too wonderful. I simply can't believe Maurice painted it".

"Neither can I", admitted Charlotte ; and again there was comradeship between them.

Meanwhile Dwight had moved sideways from the canvas, as though to inspect it from another angle; and, in another minute, he disappeared.

§ 4

It was a full quarter of an hour before Dwight came back.

"Where on earth have you been?" asked Elizabeth.

"Dealing in art", answered Dwight. "It's the easiest way of spending seven thousand five hundred dollars you ever saw. One just marches up to that friend of mine in the vestibule and signs a contract note."

Even Charlotte's usual calm deserted her.

"You don't mean to say you've bought Maurice's picture", she exclaimed.

"Sure thing—though the contract note states he isn't actually obliged to part with it."

"But why?"

Dwight's face assumed what Elizabeth always called its "Red Indian" expression.

"Oh, I just took a fancy to it", he parried.

Later, alone in their bedroom while they dressed for dinner, he made the startling admission:

"No. You're wrong there, honey. I wouldn't spend all that money to do even a member of your family a good turn. I bought 'Woman in White' because I just couldn't resist her. She makes me feel like . . . like I used to feel before I was certain you'd marry me".

Elizabeth laughed, "Then perhaps we'd better not go to Paris. We shall have to look Maurice up if we do, and you might fall in love with the actual Lina".

But although Dwight's business took them to Paris for the best part of the week, the only news they could procure of Maurice, imparted by telephone, was:

"Why yes. They were here most of the winter. But now I don't know where they are. Germany, I believe".

And it was from an obscure spa in Germany that there came to the Manor Maurice's letter accepting Dwight's offer for "Woman in White".

CHAPTER EIGHTY-TWO

§ 1

SOME of the expressions in Maurice's letter to Dwight puzzled Charlotte.

"I can't feel you're getting much of a bargain", he wrote, characteristically without regard for punctuation, "as a matter of fact I never thought anybody would pay that price, that's why I made it, what I mean is I didn't really want to sell the thing at all."

Puzzling, too, was the abrupt change of address, slurred over in a letter which reached her by the same post, and read:

"Mother darling we got a bit fed up with Paris and a chap I met told me the scenery here is simply wonderful, he was quite right and I'm out most of the day painting, so don't mind if we don't turn up till the winter, how's Johnny, Lina joins me in best love".

§ 2

"It's lucky our budding Velasquez is a bit better with his brush than he is with a pen", chaffed John when he arrived for the week end.

But John had brought Johnny, "home for the summer hols, granny", with him—and, for the following weeks, Charlotte put all puzzles out of her mind.

The boy's nascent intelligence was a pure delight. Tall for his age, he promised—as Elizabeth phrased it—to be "too handsome for words". He had none of his father's juvenile inhibitions, and a physical courage which only stopped short at recklessness.

Laura and Baldock doted on him. With Mrs. Baldock he insisted on talking French, "Because great-granny says you

can't be a gentleman unless you do, granny. Only of course that's rather rot. I mean, being a gentleman really means not hurting people, doesn't it?"

Dwight, who had the American habit of spoiling children, applauded the sentiment; but Charlotte remonstrated, "Don't be such a little prig"; and Johnny, having slunk off to look up the word in his father's big dictionary (he hated to confess ignorance) returned crestfallen but still argumentative.

"It says", he protested, "that a prig is someone who offends and bores other people. Do I offend and bore you, granny? Does father offend and bore you? You called him a prig last night."

On which John said, "That's quite enough backchat from you, young man. Run away and get your breeches on, or granny won't take you for your ride".

Charlotte and her grandson rode together every day. He took to horses, as he had taken to a gun or a fishing rod, naturally. And his love for the Manor overmatched her own, making all her financial struggles—she was only realising now, how hard those early struggles had been—to preserve his inheritance for him, more than worthwhile.

So that, those August days—with John also making holiday, with Dwight and Elizabeth renewing their young memories on every woodland walk they took of a morning—Charlotte was no longer afraid of sentiment, courting it rather than eschewing it; and experiencing no shock when Johnny, prowling in the attics, unearthed those sketches which Rupert Whittinghame had made nearly a quarter of a century before.

Rupert—it seemed to her that afternoon—was something less than a ghost. He had played no real part in her life. Neither had anything of him except one gift, the artist's, been transmitted to their son—whose subsequent letters held no more puzzles.

He and Lina—Maurice wrote—were "happier than ever". He continued to "work like a Trojan". And "thanks to the Philadelphian munificence" he and his "darling wife" had no money troubles.

One of Charlotte's letters, dated the seventh of September, nineteen thirty-four read, "Here is a little surprise for you.

I've made up my mind to go over to America for Honoria's wedding".

Maurice wrote back, from Italy that time, "I shouldn't wonder if you weren't a bit nervous the first night on board, but don't let it get you down, very few people are shipwrecked twice".

Still wakeful to the faint thud of the engines at three o'clock in the morning, she marvelled at Maurice's perspicacity—and the obtuseness of John, who had laughed, "Nervous. You. That only shows how little he understands you, mother".

And, intermittently, all the way across the Atlantic—though she slept well enough after that first night—her imagination, unusually active, returned to the puzzle of her youngest son.

Could love really alter a man's whole character? Was Maurice really as happy, as hard at work and as solvent as his letter held him out to be?

But the first sight of Philip, waving up to her from the dock side, drove all such speculations from her mind.

§ 3

Philip had flown to New York. Philip insisted that his mother must fly back to Philadelphia with him. He had brought "my valet" to see her "baggage through the customs". When, after a breath-taking drive, they arrived at the flying field, she realised, slightly to her horror, that he was piloting his own plane.

"Do you always do this?" she asked, as he handed her into the cabin.

"As a rule. It's so much quicker. Besides I hate trains and motoring's so dangerous."

He touched the selfstarter, watched his gauges for a minute or so, and signalled to the mechanics, explaining, "She's rather an old model. We've got sprags on the latest ones". They taxied into the wind. He pulled back his wheel. Newark Flying Field sank, dwindled behind their rudder.

They climbed higher. Fascinated, she saw the harbour of New York, far below their port wing tip, and to starboard the immeasurable land, crisscrossed with roads and railroad lines, dotted here and there with towns, factories, parks.

"Great country." Philip had to speak loudly. "Only in its infancy, too. That's what makes it so fascinating. People at home don't know anything about the States. Except the rot they see in the films.

"Noisy crate, this", he went on. "We're silencing the cabins in our new ones. Some seaweed preparation."

Charlotte said, "Don't talk. I'm enjoying myself. I've never been up before".

Soon they were over Trenton, following the Delaware. In what seemed an incredibly short time Charlotte saw Philadelphia, spread like a toy town below her. And now they were across the Schuylkill, stooping for earth, and all that earth somehow familiar—from her long-ago memories of it, from countless letters.

Then Philip banked, and she recognised the very house through whose gates she had driven with Cornelius and Aurelia nearly a quarter of a century before.

§ 4

A girl waved, a girl ran from the terrace of that Colonial house, as Philip circled to make his three-point landing. Charlotte, not too happy as he banked, saw other figures following. Their wheels touched; they taxied; Philip applied his brakes—and a moment or so later she was stepping out, staring at her girlhood's very self.

Her girlhood's self, a little out of breath from running, said, "I'm Honoria". Her girlhood's self kissed her. In another moment or so she was surrounded by more of her family—Dwight, Elizabeth, Constance and Gloria, their younger daughters, Mercy, lovelier than ever.

"I'm going to have a baby", said Mercy. "So I couldn't run as fast as the others."

Laughing and chattering they led her towards the known house, which had once been Theodore Mansfield's.

"We thought we'd better take it over after all", explained Dwight; and Philip, "I'm doing a deal with him for theirs."

In the big hall, they found Aurelia. An English butler brought sherry and biscuits. Constance and Gloria departed on their own occasions. Honoria said, "I'd better go and phone Buddy". Charlotte commented on the likeness.

"That's what I always say", proclaimed Dwight. "But Elizabeth just can't see it. Maybe she doesn't recollect you as well as I do."

"Nonsense", snapped Elizabeth. "As though I wouldn't recollect my own mother. Why, their hair isn't the same colour."

"But their eyes are."

"And their souls", thought Charlotte. But that, she kept to herself; and so did Honoria, strangely drawn to this woman of whom she had heard so much, but whom she had not seen since early childhood, when she had been more than a little overawed by her.

"She's come", said Honoria over the telephone. "And she's the grandest person. I've taken the most enormous fancy to her."

They sat next to each other at lunch in the panelled dining room, where Dwight had hung Maurice's picture.

"Do you like it?" asked Charlotte.

Her granddaughter hesitated.

"I never know", she said finally. "Of course it's a marvellous piece of painting. But it doesn't make me happy. I'm glad I'm not going to have to live with it."

"Why?"

Again Honoria hesitated, looking at her with her own blue eyes.

"The real trouble for me", she began slowly, "is that he's made her too beautiful. She can't really be like that. No woman is. She's what men imagine we are when they're too fond of us."

"You mean that he has over-idealised her."

"Something like that. It's so difficult to explain. But—I should hate it if my Buddy thought that way about me. In fact I wouldn't marry him if he did. It'd be too dangerous."

"Dangerous?"

"Why, yes. One would never be able to be human."

And Honoria broke off, leaving her grandmother considerably astonished that such insight could be the property of one so young.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-THREE

§ 1

THERE were many things about Honoria which astonished Charlotte—but nearly all of them sensed rather than told. The girl—she realised—had her own reticence. And this, with only three days left before her wedding, one could hardly expect to break down.

Yet every now and again, during those rather hectic days, a chance look, a chance word, seemed to bring them closer to each other; and on the third night, just as she was making ready for bed, Charlotte was astonished to hear a cautious tap on her door.

"I want to talk to you", said Honoria, closing the door softly behind her. "May I?"

"Confidences?" asked Charlotte, smiling.

Her own voice, her own smile, answered, "It is rather confidential. I wouldn't dare tell father or mother. They're not understanding enough".

"But why should you think I am?"

"I just know you are", said Honoria; and seated herself, crosslegged in a Chinese wrapper and pink pyjamas, on the side of Charlotte's bed.

"May I have a cigarette?" she went on. "Or do you hate people smoking in your bedroom?"

Charlotte passed over her case, with the last of the Turkish cigarettes she had brought from England, and a slide of matches.

"Go on", she said; and, smiling again, "Tell me you're not in love with your Buddy. Only don't expect me to believe you."

"Oh, I'm in love with him all right", said Honoria; but she added, touching a match to her cigarette, "Only I wasn't always. And he doesn't know about it. Are you very shocked?"

Secretly—the girl's implication had been perfectly obvious—Charlotte was a little shocked; and Honoria realised it immediately.

"I was afraid you would be", she continued. "Of course when you were young that sort of thing didn't happen. You married practically out of the nursery, didn't you? When you were only just seventeen."

She broke off. At a loss for better words, Charlotte patted her shoulder, saying, "I'm not as shocked as all that. I'm only rather sorry".

"So am I. In a way. You see, it seems so mean not to have told Buddy. I wish I had—sometimes. I nearly told him this afternoon. But then I got to thinking, 'That'd be mean, too. He'd have to say it didn't matter'. The question is: Does it matter? I mean, when a thing's done, it's done. The other fellow's just dead as far as I'm concerned."

"Are you quite sure?"

Charlotte had spoken without thinking; and the girl's reply, "What makes you ask that?" was equally thoughtless. Yet for a perceptible while silence had them both.

"Because he might come back into your life", said Charlotte at last.

"And I might fall in love with him again?"

"Yes."

Once more, silence held them. The big house seemed extraordinarily quiet. "That's what happened to me", Charlotte wanted to say. But somehow she knew that there was no need to say anything; that this girl understood. "You speak from experience", Honoria's eyes seemed to be saying. Aloud she said:

"I don't think that could happen. Not now that I know what a bad fellow he really is. And anyway I'm not worrying about it. What I'm worrying about is whether I ought to have told Buddy. Would you have?"

She stubbed out her cigarette in the ashtray.

"Would you have?" she repeated; then, "I know that's not a fair question. Just as it isn't fair to ask you for advice. But there's nobody else. I don't make friends easily, like most girls."

"Neither did I", interrupted Charlotte; and suddenly she found herself saying:

"My experience in life is that it's always better to ride one's own line. You've done that so far—why not go on doing it? We have to pay for most things we do in this world—and the price of that sort of thing is . . . silence".

"You mean"—Honoriam stared at her—"I oughtn't even to have told you?"

"It might have been better. Still, I'm glad you did. Only don't tell anybody else.

"Ever", added Charlotte; and, for the last time, silence held the young woman and the ageing.

Then, impulsively, Honoriam rose, and held out both her beautiful hands. Charlotte took them.

"You really are the grandest person", said Honoriam; and leaned forward, and kissed her, and was gone.

§ 2

Again that night, Charlotte Carteret lay wakeful. Honoriam's confidence had touched her. More touching still, were those last impulsive words.

"Youth", she thought. "How much we could help it. But how rarely we're allowed to. One generation after another—and all making the same mistakes."

She slept at last, and dreamlessly. But morning found her at her most sentimental. All her children were grown up, leading their own lives after their own fashions. Suppose John did marry again, what of human relationship—that close family relationship which was so dear to her—would be left?

In that mood—keeping to her own room while florists decorated the house for the wedding—she wrote to John and to Maurice. Yet the mood itself, she managed to keep out of her letters. John and Maurice were both happy—so were Philip and Elizabeth. Why worry any of them with "senile bleatings"? Life was for the young.

As usual, cynicism followed sentimentality. What a dull world it would be if young women never made mistakes. All the same . . .

"All the same", thought the Victorian in Charlotte when, early in the afternoon, she watched Honoria in her bridal white come slowly down the flower-decorated staircase, "I wish *she* hadn't. And I wish I hadn't. One ought to be above that sort of thing."

And kneeling—it seemed queer to be kneeling for a wedding service in this hall where one gossiped and drank sherry—her eyes wandered to the open door of the dining room, through which she could just see the outline of "Woman in White".

The picture still hypnotized her. But today, again, it caused her one twinge of fear. Honoria's judgment seemed all too accurate. Maurice had not painted an actual woman. The artist in him had painted his ideal. Supposing the actual woman—this Lina—could not live up to that ideal? What would happen to the artist in Maurice? Worse—what might happen to the man?

Fear put those questions. Panic answered them. Still on her knees, she found herself praying that Maurice's wife would live up to the picture he had made of her. For if not—curious, how the blurred drift of religious phrases came back to one—"the last stages of that man would be worse than the first".

§ 3

The short marriage ceremony ended—and, with it, Charlotte's whole mood. Balance regained, she let herself enjoy the junketing of what Philip called "our younger set".

"They're a great crowd", said Philip. "But don't imagine that they're representative Americans. Because there isn't such an animal as a representative American. Yet."

The criticism intrigued her. She asked him to elaborate it.

"A lot of these kids", he said, pointing to the dancers, "want to be more English than the English. If you listen, you can actually hear some of the girls trying to say, 'Really'. Others are trying to ape New York. Some of the most cultured Philadelphians are Jews. But you won't find one of them here. And most of the older people are proud of being hundred-per-cent Americans—one of the most ridiculous phrases ever coined. Because, again, there isn't such an animal.

Yet. America has to absorb this crowd, just as it has to absorb all the other crowds, millions of people like myself, who only came over originally because they thought of it as a Tom Tiddler's ground, because they wanted to have a hand in the biggest smash and grab raid of all time. But that phase is pretty well over. We're only living in the backwash of it."

"We!" interrupted Charlotte; and Philip, wise to the implication, flushed.

"I haven't taken out my papers yet", he went on. "But I'm going to. My work's here. My home's here. My money's here. And—and you can't bring children up with a divided allegiance. You do agree with that, don't you, mother?"

"Yes. I suppose so", smiled Charlotte.

But that night once more—with bride and bridegroom long gone and the last of the guests' cars away—she lay wakeful. For the fact that Philip had at last decided to denationalise himself seemed somehow symbolic of Philip lost.

Philip and Elizabeth—she realised that night—were both lost. They had detached themselves from the family orbit. The accident of birth had been nothing against the incidence of love. Philip's Mercy, Elizabeth's Dwight, had all the claims on them. She herself none.

That mood, however, also passed—to the thought, "You never admitted that Gertrude had any claims on you after you married. Nobody ever resented overmothering more than you did".

And for the rest of her stay in the Radnor country she enjoyed herself to the top of her bent, leading much the same life she led at the Manor, with just enough difference to provide the spice.

§ 4

There were various differences—Charlotte eventually discovered—between the country life of Pennsylvania and the country life of the English Shires. And one of these her daughter explained, about a week after Honoria's wedding, as they motored home from fox hunting along the Gradyville Road.

"We're not really democratic here", said Elizabeth, "though

we're always pretending to be. I don't have the local doctor to dinner—or the local clergyman. And I hardly know a single farmer. The classes don't mix with us like they do with you."

"What she means", laughed Dwight, seated between them in the back of the limousine, "is that we're the bigger snobs, except in business. And there we're still inclined to be feudal. But of course that can't last.

"Father couldn't see what was happening", continued Dwight, just before they reached the house. "He belonged to the old school of rampant individualism. So do I—emotionally. I hate the idea of politicians butting into industry. But I realise I've got to put up with it. Survival's a question of adaptability. The great mistake we've made—I'm talking as one of the hundred-per-cent Americans Philip won't believe in—is that we've always left politics to the politicians. I honestly believe you could search the United States from New England to California—and not find one man like John."

§ 5

Later, over an excellent dinner, Dwight elaborated his ideas about John, whom he saw as the typical Englishman of the best class, "working quietly for his fellow creatures without any thought of self"; and Charlotte's heart warmed to him.

The feeling that Philip and Elizabeth were lost from the family orbit, nevertheless, persisted throughout her stay. Essentially, both had become Americans; and America, however much one might like and feel akin to certain individuals who lived there, was a foreign country, admirable, but not one's own.

She confessed that to Philip, over a *tête-à-tête* lunch at the Bellevue-Stratford; and he was forced to admit:

"All this talk of hands-across-the-sea is mere sentimentalism. Just as it's mere sentimentalism when some American politician with Irish ancestry makes a pilgrimage to Dublin. The only thing that really unites the two nations is a mutual interest in peace. And it'll take another century, or another world

war, before you can get the bulk of our population to realise that”.

Such serious talks, however, were rare. For Dwight and Philip were both at their busiest; Aurelia disinclined to take any view except her father's when he had built a high stone wall round his estate, “because the more I see of present-day tendencies the less I approve of them”; Elizabeth completely wrapped up in her social and family duties, and Mercy concentrating on the production of her first baby with a single-mindedness of purpose which Charlotte found a little difficult to understand.

A chance word about this brought further enlightenment.

“We always concentrate on what we're doing”, said Mercy.

“We don't believe in diffusion of interests, like you do.”

And to Charlotte the way she and Elizabeth always spoke of the English as “you” seemed no less symbolic than the way Philip now spoke of Americans as “we”.

Soon, she was feeling homesick for John and Johnny.

Nevertheless, with departure looming daily nearer, she experienced regret, and a wish to understand more of this country, realising the paucity of her experience, and how little it entitled her to sit in judgment. This realisation also, Philip confirmed.

“I'd like to fly you from coast to coast”, said Philip. “That'd at least give you a bird's eye view. And you can't get much more if you live here for twenty years. There isn't a man or a woman living who really *knows* the United States. That's why we've never produced a national author, only regional ones.”

But on the last night of all it was again the family purview, rather than the international, which preoccupied Charlotte's mind. Here she sat, round a pleasant log fire, with her own kith and kin. This was her daughter and her daughter's husband. These two young girls had her blood, her husband's blood in their veins. This was her son and her son's wife. Their child, too, would inherit something of the Carteret character, something of the Henderson character.

Johnny, too!

And, thinking of Johnny, it was in her to feel very proud

and very happy at the thought that she had so fulfilled herself (for was not the family a woman's finest fulfilment) ; until the dining room door swung open, and she found herself looking, away from these faces, at the face of Maurice's wife.

It seemed as though that face were striving to articulate some message.

Then the door swung to again, as Dwight's butler closed it behind him ; and the hallucination (for of course it had only been hallucination) vanished, leaving only the tiniest residue of apprehension, soon forgotten.

Because, after all, what could there be to apprehend ?

CHAPTER EIGHTY-FOUR

§ 1

THERE was nothing more to apprehend, decided the Charlotte Carteret whom her daughter and her daughter's husband accompanied to New York next day. What fears, what dangers life had held for her—and after all they had not been so many—were now over. With Maurice happily married and successful in his profession, she could dismiss the last of her preoccupations.

This, very resolutely, she decided to do.

New York—where she and Dwight and Elizabeth spent three hectic days before the steamer sailed—amused her. The trip home, during which she made various pleasant acquaintances, brought no return of nervousness. Her first talk with John, her first sight of the Manor—not left for so long since war time—were equal satisfactions; and Johnny's Christmas holidays five weeks of pure joy.

He killed his first woodcock that Christmas; and was promoted to a new pony which Laura declared "much too big for him", and took what he himself described as "my first proper toss".

Charlotte, happening to look over her shoulder as he drove Manly at that stiff timber, knew he would never get over it—but did not pull up when she saw him fall.

"He would have hated me to", she told John that evening; and when he remonstrated, "Laura's quite right. Manly's too much for him", she said, "There are quite enough young mollicoddles about nowadays without our adding to the number."

For she was simply not going to let herself sentimentalise any more, especially about Maurice, who wrote, "I know you'll find it rather unforgivable, but somehow I don't feel like coming home yet awhile".

"Of course you don't", she wrote back. "You're wrapped up in your work and your wife. And why not? I'm perfectly happy as long as you are. Don't you know me well enough by now to understand that there's no need to be smarmy with me?"

§ 2

Charlotte's letter—she thought, with Johnny back at school—might have offended Maurice. He did not reply for the best part of a month, and then only with two hastily scrawled pages from Paris.

It was the middle of February by then; and the letter needed no answer. She kept him waiting for another fortnight; and did not worry too much when her envelope came back to her, marked, "*Inconnu*".

"He's always been a bit haphazard", she told John. "We probably shan't hear from him again till the Academy opens."

"If then", said John, already more than a little preoccupied about, "This blighter Mussolini. You don't know all that's going on, mother. Neither do I, if it comes to that. But the general feeling in the House is that he means to gobble up Abyssinia, League or no League. And then the fat won't half be in the fire".

But some chance words from Gladys Willoughby, imparted at the final meet of the season, "Horatio and I flew over to Paris last week. Who do you think we ran into? That Maurice of yours. I didn't realise how ill he'd been", seemed more important to Charlotte than all John's politics.

For, illness apart, since Maurice was still in Paris, why had her last letter been returned?

§ 3

Increasingly throughout the April of nineteen thirty-five Charlotte would catch herself worrying about Maurice, whose letters had ceased. Then, forty-eight hours before the Academy opened, she received her Private View ticket and a long explanation of his silence.

"I got a touch of pleurisy about a couple of months ago", he wrote, "and somehow or other I didn't feel in the mood for

writing, you know how that sort of thing leaves you, but I'm alright again now and I don't think you'll find my three pictures too bad, I hope to goodness I sell 'em because it's a damned expensive job being ill, have I spelt alright alright or ought there to be two lls in it."

There was more to the same burbling effect, and a huge blot on the last page of thin notepaper, and a postscript, "Lina sends love, she's been absolutely trumps during my illness, this is an awful scrawl because I've been writing it in a café".

And Charlotte's worry was not decreased by the lack of any address beyond, "St. Tropez. France".

"What's the matter, granny? You look as though you'd had some bad news", asked Johnny, just home for his Easter holidays and seated with her at "Granduncle Herbert's" breakfast table, as she put the letter back in its envelope.

"He really is supernaturally intelligent", thought Charlotte; but snapping, "Bad news. Nonsense. It's only that I always find it so difficult to read your Uncle Maurice's handwriting", gave him no more of her confidence than she gave to John.

Both of them accompanied her to the Academy. Lunching them afterwards, she could not help agreeing with John's verdict, "I'm a little disappointed with Maurice's stuff. Why didn't he send in another portrait?"

Back in the country, however, she again dismissed Maurice from all except her subconscious mind. John and Johnny, her house, her gardens, the incessant round of rural tasks which no week-ending townsman ever quite understands, monopolised the whole foreground of her existence. The background—whether Philip's and Elizabeth's in America or Maurice's "trapesing the Continent"—was scarcely in perspective. "Rising sixty", she had never felt younger. Almost it seemed some other woman to whom Honoria wrote, "You're going to be a double great-grandmother by the fall. I do hope I have a boy like Mercy".

And when, at midsummer, John's excited words on the telephone, "He's got it, mother", were followed by Gertrude's slightly ridiculous telegram, "John Carteret first in Harrow Scholarship examination giving school whole holiday to

celebrate should like my daughter to be present", the cup of middle-age happiness seemed full.

§ 4

Charlotte and John spent the night before that whole holiday in the hotel at Middlehampton. Next day Johnny—who bore his scholastic honours with due modesty, maintaining, "It was a bit of a fluke, really—they happened to ask me what I knew about the Restoration in the *viva voce*, and of course I had that pat enough"—captained the first eleven and carried his bat for seventy.

Discussing him on their way back to London, his father said, "I don't take any credit. It's mostly your doing that he's turned out so well"; and the cup of her happiness overflowed; till he turned the talk on politics again, to admit:

"It's no good blinking the fact. We're up against a piece of deliberate brigandage. And the hell of it is we're not strong enough to put a stop to it single-handed. You mark my words, the League isn't going to work. France can't afford to offend Italy. And the other nations are ruddy well useless".

She realised—because John swore so rarely—how perturbed he must be. All through the weeks that followed, his perturbation increased; so that, every now and again, she feared for a return of his shell-shock.

"I don't see what you're in such a state about", she protested, one evening in early September. "Mussolini's not likely to tackle us unless we goad him into it. Who cares if he does bomb a few blackamoors?"

And that was the evening when John Carteret put all that the years had made of him into one speech.

"I'm not in quite such a state as you're trying to make out", he said. "But ever since Nan's death I've felt that my real job in the world—I know this sounds a bit priggish, but one can't help one's feelings—is to try to leave it a little bit better than I found it. That was why I joined the labour party. That was why I became a National Labour man after our old gang had made such a hash of things. But now I'm

coming to the conclusion that we've all of us made a hash of things. We've all talked too much and thought too little. We've imagined we were creating Utopia by beating our swords into ploughshares. And what are the results? Mussolini. Hitler. Stalin. You may be right up to a point. I don't hold any particular brief for my fellow Abyssinian. There's enough slavery still going on in Abyssinia to justify the League's turning most of it over to Italy as a mandate. But when it comes to one ruler of one country making himself prosecutor, judge, jury *and* executioner all in one—and the world looking on while he does it—why then, don't you see, we're just back to nineteen-fourteen, and the sooner ordinary chaps like myself—because after all I'm only a backbencher—realise that there's only one thing to be done the better."

"And that one thing?" asked Charlotte.

John sucked at his pipe, and looked towards the lake where Johnny was practising casts with his new trout rod. Then he looked up at the sky for a while, and presently she heard the far drumming of a plane.

The plane sailed over them.

"There's your answer", he said. "If once the Italians start bombing the blackamoor men, as you call them, how can they help bombing the blackamoor kids? And once you admit any nation's got the right to do that, just at one man's bidding, what's the use of chaps like myself working our guts out for social reform and better housing conditions in this two-by-four island.

"Housing conditions!" fumed John. "When one man can give an order to blow the houses to hell with thermite bombs and put back civilization by five centuries. I've been for disarmament ever since I got out of the last war. But what's the use? You can't fight gangsters with truncheons."

And after elaborating his simile he concluded, "Philip was quite right. We've all been crazy. We've been so busy decorating the house that we've forgotten to insure it".

"Arms for the love of Allah", misquoted Charlotte. "You're right, of course. Only—will you ever be able to make the people of this country see it?"

Laura, who had listened in silence to the conversation, said,

"If he does, I suppose it'll mean more income tax"; and they laughed about this—Laura never having been an income-tax payer—after she had gone to bed.

§ 5

John laughed often nowadays. Yet in his laughter—it seemed to Charlotte—there was still not enough of the truly human; and, considering those words, "Ever since Nan's death I've felt that my real job in the world is to try to leave it a little bit better than I found it", her mature judgment could still accuse him of Puritanism.

John might be—was—all that Dwight had suggested. John might be—was—the best son in the world, and the best father. John's whole life might be—was—dedicate to the service of his fellow creatures.

One supreme quality, nevertheless, John lacked. His sympathies for the mass were apt to harden his judgment of the individual. Believing the bulk of his fellow creatures saintly—given only the right conditions to develop their saintliness—he had little tolerance for any obstinate sinner, and no tolerance whatever if the sinner in question happened to be, as he phrased it, "one of us".

"A man who's had a happy childhood and a decent education", he said once, "doesn't deserve any sympathy if he goes wrong afterwards. I'd give the fraudulent banker, with Eton and Oxford on his record, twice the sentence I'd give some poor devil who happens to have done half a dozen stretches for burglary. Not that he's much good either. Some people—a very small minority, I grant you—are born anti-social. All this modern jargon about it's not being their fault is just gup."

And another time he had said to her, "The law's always arguable. But one can't argue about morality. A thing's either right or wrong. Most people live decently. A few don't even know what decency means. They've no codes, and no consciences. If they are like that, they're no good wasting powder and shot on, because the devil always claims his own in the long run".

She pondered those two sayings again after she had kissed the troutless Johnny good night; and, watching John light his last pipe, she thought, "It's a pity there's that hard streak in him. He'll never be the real reformer he imagines himself until he realises that men and women have emotions as well as intellects and consciences. Where does he get that streak from? Me—or his father?"

"From his father", she eventually decided. "His father didn't know what temptation meant either."

§ 6

Yet that decision—further reflection suggested to Charlotte—must be amplified. If Nan had lived, if Nan had gone on loving him—only *would* she have gone on loving him—*had* she ever really loved him?—John's outlook might have softened, as her own outlook, with the passing of the years.

"It's not the surface hardness in him that matters", she thought. "I've kept that myself. The flaw isn't superficial, and it's growing fundamental. If only one could cure it for him. If only he could fall in love again. Falling in love might help; might bring him to realise that men and women, even in our class, aren't altogether responsible if their lives go to shipwreck."

For in herself, she imagined, that humanising process which only the years teach the tempted was now complete. With middle age she had attained philosophy.

She felt sure of this. She could not perceive—testing it again and again during an autumn of political upheaval which sent John to his third general election and Johnny to his first term at Harrow—that her philosophy was largely a delusion, and her tolerance for human failings almost as academic as John's hardness towards them.

Because hitherto—though neither would have admitted it—life had been at least normally kind to John and Charlotte, showing them only its due proportion of safety and danger, comedy and drama.

Tragedy—since sudden death whether by sea or land is not the real tragedy—had never touched them closely. Charlotte

knew it only from books, from newspapers ; John—not having a criminal practice—merely from the gossip of his fellow lawyers. Until . . .

§ 7

. . . Until tragedy staggered up to the Manor terrace—one wintry evening with the skies smoked steel over the snow on King's Oak Hill—and spoke with Maurice's voice.

"It's rather a long walk from town", said Maurice. "But I was lucky. I managed to jump a lorry most of the way. I ought to have written, I suppose, or telegraphed or telephoned or something. But I only just had enough money to get from Paris to London. I didn't realise the head of the family never went to the office on Saturdays. Uncle Herbert wasn't there either or I'd have cadged a fiver off him. Don't look so worried, mother. I'm not going to faint or anything. I'll be as right as rain as soon as I've had something to eat. No, damn it all, John . . ."

For once again, as on that occasion nearly twenty-five years ago, John had gathered Maurice clumsily in his arms ; though this time, because of his leg, he had to invoke Charlotte's help before they could get Maurice into the house and on to the sofa in the morning room, where he opened his eyes again, and said :

"Sorry. I'm afraid I'm making a damned nuisance of myself. As usual".

It was that "As usual"—more than his white face, and his thin wrists, and the whole woebegone air of the man—which first touched John.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-FIVE

§ I

LAURA brought brandy to the morning room. Simeon followed with sandwiches.

"Fancy his still being about. Healthy part of the world, this", said Maurice; and he tried to grin as he went on, with a touch of the old humour, "I'm afraid I've given you rather a shock, mother. But there's nothing to worry about. It's only the old trouble. Money. Lina and I are stony broke. It all happened rather suddenly. She had to go into . . . into hospital. They . . . insisted on the money in advance. Now they want some more. Fifty quid if you please. I suppose you don't happen to have that much in the house."

But that lie—Maurice realised almost before he had spoken it—would not serve.

Nothing would serve—he realised as the strength came back to him—but a modicum of the truth. And suddenly, with Laura and Simeon away from the room, he blurted out his first truth:

"I suppose I'd better come clean. Lina isn't in hospital. She's in prison. For giving a stumer cheque. But it wasn't her fault. She'd been taking that beastly cocaine. She didn't know what she was doing. I can get her out easily enough. The chap only wants his money".

And after that, bit by bit—with now John putting a question and now Charlotte—they forced the whole truth out of him, down to that last:

"I know I'm a fool to go on loving her. I know I'm a fool to go on living with her. But I do love her. And she loves me. As long as I can keep her away from that filthy drug there isn't a sweeter girl in the world. And nobody else can keep her away from it. I tried putting her into a

home. As a matter of fact, she's been in three homes. That's where most of the money's gone. But it's no use. She's sworn she'll kill herself if I make her go into another one. And if I leave her . . . Damn it all, how can I leave her without a shilling? She hasn't any money of her own. She hasn't a family of her own. I'd rather kill *myself* than do that. Honestly I would".

But John's first suggestion, "Perhaps these foreign homes aren't any good. Why don't you bring her to England and have her properly doctored? Never mind about the cheque that's easy enough to fix up", he vetoed at once.

"She wouldn't consent", he said. "And if she isn't . . . taken care of, there's never any knowing what she'll do. That filthy drug. They get it wherever they go. If I brought her home it would only mean a scandal sooner or later. It isn't as though we were nobodies. I'm fairly well known. You're a member of Parliament. Supposing she got herself arrested in England. Think of the newspapers."

And when John asked, with a new note of kindness in his voice, "But what are you going to do about her, old chap?" he said, very simply :

"Go back and take care of her myself. What else is there to be done?"

They gave him a last whiskey and soda ; and persuaded him to bed. To each of them, once they were alone, the tragedy seemed irremediable. "He was always such a fool", said Charlotte ; and John, "He was always rather a weakling". Yet the words only served to conceal their thoughts.

Secretly their emotions admired him—and for the very quality their intellects despised.

And again next morning they admired him, for his assumed cheerfulness, for his insensate optimism, for his obstinacy, even for his lies.

"This may have been just the lesson she needed", he lied. "I exaggerated a bit last night. She doesn't take it all the time. She's just as anxious to be cured as I am to cure her. I honestly believe I can cure her. It's largely a question of keeping her away from the places where she can get the stuff. The big towns, you know. I made an awful mistake when I

brought her back to Paris. So what I've been thinking, if only you two can see your way to helping me for a few months, till I get on my feet again, after all it isn't too easy to paint *and* sell one's pictures when one's got this sort of thing hanging over one. . . ."

On which John interrupted, "Of course we're going to help you, old chap. We both realise it isn't *your* fault"; and Charlotte, despite her anxiety, felt her eyes suffusing with a strange joy.

This—that one sentence told her—might be a new John. Yet that this could be a new Maurice, her intellect refused to believe. A very strong man, a very great artist, might just be able to cope with the task Maurice's quixotry had imposed on him. But her youngest son was neither strong nor great. Therefore, he would fail.

All her intellectual processes, all her experience of him (and of life) united to tell her that Maurice must fail. But her emotions continued to admire him; and to thank him for the miracle wrought in John.

For already, that Sunday morning, as she listened to his quiet, "You'd better leave the French authorities to me, Maurice. We have got agents in Paris. I'll phone them first thing tomorrow", she felt assured of the miracle, and that this really was a new John—kindlier, more tolerant, more understanding.

Wise, too!

§ 2

It had been very wise, that suggestion of John's, "The best thing we can do, old chap, is to make you a regular allowance—say for the next twelve months—till you really are on your feet again". Charlotte agreed with it absolutely; and so, to her surprise, did Maurice.

"I never was fit to be trusted with a lump of ready money", he grinned. "Look how soon I blued my capital. Look what I did with that fifteen hundred Dwight paid me."

But there was no grin on his face when he kissed his mother goodbye.

He kissed her three times—one kiss for each cheek, and one for her lips.

"It'll be all right", he said. "I know it'll be all right. Don't worry about me, whatever you do."

Then John called from his driving seat, "Come along, old chap. I always allow three hours up to town, and you simply must have a decent dinner before I take you to the station"; and Maurice's hand clung to hers for a last moment before he turned away, climbed into the car.

Her eyes tried to follow that car; but before it was midway of the drive she felt her shoulders begin to shake and the tears blinding her.

"Keep your pecker up", somebody seemed to be saying; "because it'll be all over, and you'll be a major's wife before the New Year's in."

Rupert! Going to his death in battle.

Give the man his due. He'd never lacked physical courage. And this son of his—of theirs—had more than physical courage. So she *must* "keep her pecker up". She mustn't even let herself imagine that Rupert's son could fail. She must pray for him. Pray for him.

That night, and for many a night afterwards, alone on her knees Charlotte Carteret did pray—because if Maurice were neither strong nor great, at whose door lay the weakness and the littleness?—articulately, to that God who might exist, though her intellect still refused any real conviction of Him.

And for a month, for two months, for three months, it seemed—from Maurice's letters—as though her prayers were being granted.

Then, for another month and yet another, it seemed to her heightened imagination as though—under all the optimism of those letters—she could read a doubt.

But John did not share her doubt.

"He's bound to be a little depressed every now and again", said John. "It can't be much fun for him, with his temperament, always to keep away from the big towns. But of course that's what he's got to do. And I'll bet he's painting some jolly good landscapes up there in the Pyrenees, though he does pretend he's dissatisfied with them."

It was May by then. The first of June brought a case of pictures. Charlotte and John stood over that case while Baldock opened it.

"You're right about his work anyway", she said; and he:

"I'd like to buy that pair myself. Shall I write and tell him so".

"Do. He'll be pleased."

Maurice wrote back, characteristically, "My dear fellow, don't be such an ass, as though I'd take a penny from you, haven't I taken quite enough already, keep the things with my love and Lina's, we can never tell you how grateful we are, I really do feel I've succeeded in curing her at last, kiss mother for me".

That night, Charlotte dreamed he was kissing her; and when his next letter announced, "We're taking a little trip through Spain, that'll show you how much better the darling is", she enclosed a cheque with her reply.

"I'm actually beginning to feel proud of you", she wrote. "Just to prove how proud I am, here's a little contribution to your holiday expenses."

§ 3

Maurice cashed that cheque in Madrid.

He was still wondering—some three weeks later, as he laid down his rifle and propped his weary back against cool stone—how much of it Lina had stolen to buy cocaine with.

Not that such speculations really mattered.

Not now.

Not here.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-SIX

§ 1

It really was curious, decided Maurice—as he made sure that he had snapped on the safety catch of his rifle before stepping back from the sandbagged window when his “opposite number” took over guard—how little did matter, now, and here, in this beleaguered Alcazar, already short of food.

Food, of course, did matter. Yesterday had been horse flesh. Today would be mule flesh. But there were still plenty of horses and mules. And the unleavened rolls, though rock hard, didn’t taste so badly if one sprinkled a little plaster off the walls—the enemy’s bullets chipped away plenty of plaster—on them instead of salt.

The trouble about that was—it made one so terribly thirsty. And the water—even if one had been able to drink as much as one wanted—simply stank.

“Marvel, we haven’t all been poisoned already”, he thought, scratching his eight-day beard with dirty fingers. “And what wouldn’t I give for one puff of real tobacco.”

Still—these acacia leaves, once one got used to them, were no worse than the bread.

He loosened his bandolier, took a handful of the dry leaves, a packet of thin papers printed with the old cypher of the Spanish Royal Military Academy, from the frayed pocket of his sports jacket, rolled, licked and lit the cigarette.

“Shall I make you one?” he asked his opposite number.

“*Gracias.*” The boy with the khaki glengarry on his head spoke in a whisper, not moving his eyes from the sandbagged window of the house opposite, less than fifty yards away. “If you wouldn’t mind lighting it for me. I thought I saw someone move just now.”

“Well, don’t shoot unless you’re certain. Those are the orders.”

"I would like to get one Red before we go off duty. You did. *Dios ! Esta !*"

And the boy fired.

A scream answered the shot. Complete silence followed ; then the snap of the breech, the tinkle of the empty cartridge on the stone floor. Maurice put the burning leaves between the boy's lips. He took a puff of acrid smoke, blew it through his nostrils.

"I hope it wasn't a female Red", he said. "It doesn't seem quite right to shoot a woman. But their women fight, and they'd kill ours, with their shells, if we didn't keep them under cover. *Carajo*, I wish *we* had a few guns."

He ceased whispering. Maurice squatted again. It certainly was a pity they had no guns, except those two or three, whose few shells were being kept against the last emergency.

They didn't seem to have many machine guns either. A dozen all told, if one could believe one young gossip, and, "So old that they'll jam as soon as look at you. We used to take 'em to pieces for practice".

Still, they had at least a million rifle cartridges. And, if it did come to the last emergency, bayonets. It would be rather fun to jab a man in the guts with a bayonet.

Funny, how bloodthirsty one had become—and all in a few days !

§ 2

Still squatting back to wall, with only an occasional rifle shot and no shells—for it was siesta time—to disturb his musings, Maurice tried to number those few days. But the mental effort tired him.

"At least a fortnight since I've been fighting", he eventually decided. "More than three weeks—nearly a month, I should think—since Lina and I left Madrid."

Then, bit by bit, his mind gave him back the picture of that room in Madrid, and Lina lying on the bed, and the doctor he had called in bending over her, forcing up her eyelids with his spatulate fingers.

Silly—to have called in a doctor, when one knew perfectly well what had happened. Silly—to have washed out that

toothglass before he came. The specks of white at Lina's open lips, the sterterous breathing, gave the whole show away.

When once they took to drinking the stuff . . .

No wonder the doctor had shrugged his shoulders. No wonder he had said, "She will come round in a few hours, *señor*. Probably she has done this to frighten you. They do sometimes. You had a quarrel with her perhaps? If you would like me to do so, I could arrange for her to go into a clinic".

A clinic! What about this Alcazar as a clinic? She couldn't get the stuff here anyway.

The sardonic certainty amused him for a moment. His imagination began to play with it, to elaborate it, till a footfall on stone, a tall man striding round the angle of the corridor, brought him to his feet.

He saluted awkwardly. His salute was returned. Sombre eyes inspected him for a long second. A mouth hidden by a straggling moustache spoke smiling:

"*El artista Ingles, Usted?*"

"Yes, colonel."

"No movement here?"

"We have fired one shot each. Both hits."

"*Muy bien. Y la doña?*"

"My wife seemed a little better this morning, thank you."

"I am glad to hear it."

Colonel Moscardó, after a few words to the cadet at the window, "Don't expose yourself needlessly," passed on his rounds, leaving Maurice to speculate what manner of a man this could be, who had doomed his own son at the enemy's hands rather than surrender this citadel, telling him only—again if one could believe the gossipers: "All thou canst do is pray for us and die for Spain".

"But I'm blowed if *I* want to die for Spain", thought Maurice with another touch of sardonic humour. "So why the hell am I here?"

For after all it was only an accident that he should be here. If Lina hadn't stolen that money, if she hadn't had that relapse, he'd never have brought her to Toledo, he'd never

have been sipping his early *café leche*—gosh, for one good cup of fresh milk and coffee!—at the Bar Goya, when the young soldiers marched down the very street just below this window into the Plaza Zocodover, and formed up, with their backs to him, and presented arms, while that young officer in the dark tunic and the light breeches and the spurred field-boots read out his proclamation declaring a state of war and asking all well-disposed persons to report themselves to the Governor.

Not that he'd "reported himself". It wasn't his war. He'd done his damndest to keep out of it. He would have kept out of it, too, if Lina had been fit to travel, if the blighting Reds hadn't started pooping off revolvers, and setting houses on fire . . .

Once more, bit by bit, Maurice's mind gave him back pictures, a whole series of pictures this time—Lina in bed again, half-dressed and with her eyes wide open; the blank paint of the shutters; the first bullet slashing through those closed shutters; the innkeeper's face, his wife's face, as they rushed in, crying: "You cannot stay here alone, *señor*. You must come with us. Before it is too late. Before we are all murdered".

"Panic", he remembered himself thinking.

But the next revolver bullet from the street had mushroomed barely a foot over Lina's head; and within a few seconds they had heard the crackle of the nearby flames.

Maurice could still see—before the heat of mid afternoon closed his eyelids—the four shadows cast by those leaping flames as they slipped out of the back door of the inn; could still hear the innkeeper's, "This way. Keep close to the wall"; his, "Leave me. I die. Save them. By the little corral to the house of the Capucines. My wife will show you", and the last whistle of the breath through the pierced throat.

He was still dreaming, when the boy tapped him on the shoulder, that he and the two women crept across the dust of the Corralillo, by that other wall, by the barred window through which the rifles covered them and the voice said:

"Put up your hands. Keep them up. And we will open the gate".

§ 3

Maurice unclosed his eyes to realise that he and his opposite number were being relieved by two of the Civic Guards, who formed the bulk of the garrison.

"I go to sleep", said the boy. "And you?"

"I'll stay here, I think. It's cooler than the courtyard."

"*Hasta la vista*, then."

The cadet lounged off, his rifle at the carry.

"There is no discipline in this place", grumbled one of the Civic Guards to the other. But he let *el Ingles* drowse on for a good half-hour; and watched him incuriously when he at last rose to his feet.

"Dull, this afternoon", said Maurice, wiping the sleep from his eyes with the back of his hand.

"Here. But not on the north terrace. Plenty of firing there. Listen. The Reds have got a new machine gun."

The tac-tac-tac of the gun drew no reply. Presently it stopped.

"Jammed", said the guardsman. "They don't understand how to use them yet. But their Russian masters will soon teach them."

"These accursed Russians." He spat on the floor. "It is to this that they have brought our Spain."

"Why waste breath?" His companion spoke from the loophole. "We are here to fight, not to discuss politics."

A voice shouted from across the narrow street, "You won't have any breath to discuss anything when we've finished with you".

The man at the loophole did not reply, only squinted along his sights. Three windows away, rifles began to crackle. But the shots, like the voice, went unanswered. The machine gun was going again by then. Maurice rolled and lit another cigarette, thinking, "May as well go topsides for a bit. More air".

He was beginning to know his way about this vast barrack of a place. Six strides brought him by the open door of a huge room to the foot of a small staircase and up to the top floor of the south wall. Here, the windows had not yet been

sandbagged. A stray bullet whistled through one of them, chipped a piece of embellishment from the ceiling, and fell to the floor almost at Maurice's feet.

Automatically he picked the thing up and put it in his pocket. Just as he was thinking, "Make a nice souvenir for Johnny", a voice called, "*Que haces aqui?*" and a middle-aged officer in khaki confronted him.

"I was just taking a *paseo*, sir". Maurice touched his felt hat.

The officer smiled gravely.

"I, too", he said. "One becomes bored when one is not on duty. You're the Englishman, are you not? I have heard of you. I have been in England."

They exchanged names, and shook hands.

"I am of the tower guard", said Captain Miguel. "A dull job. But useful. We watch their guns. We give the alarm. You've heard the whistles of course. Perhaps you would care to see the arrangements. Not that they are very interesting."

He led the way out of the big bare attic in which they had been talking to another staircase, of heavy stone work, lit by one square window through which the sunshine slanted. More stairs of wood led to the vaulted room under the metal cupola of the north west tower, where three other officers, fieldglasses slung round their necks, were on duty.

A fourth stood by another window with his eye to a telescope, and did not turn while Maurice was being introduced to his companions, who received him with the grave courtesy of their race.

"We are grateful to you", said one of them; and another, "We appreciate it that you should be fighting for us."

The third, of the reserve like Captain Miguel, with streaks of gray in his beard, laughed:

"I thought all artists were for the Left. You seem to be the exception, Señor Carteret. Would you care to see our view? It is one of the most admirable in all Castille—though personally I am growing a little weary of it".

Captain Miguel said, "Lend him your glasses, Jaime. Don't expose yourself more than possible. The Reds have not yet discovered that this is one of our observation posts".

Taking the glasses, Maurice could not help thinking how the actual experiences of war differed from one's imagination. At this moment, for instance, he might have been an ordinary sightseer, shown over this Alcazar by a guide.

He moved to the window, looked cautiously down.

Far and directly below him the narrow slope of street known as the Cuesta, many of its houses fire-gutted, dropped to the Moorish archway of El Sangré and the Plaza Zocodover. To his left, across rooves of rose-gray pantiles—flat from this great height, gapped here and there by more burnings—rose the loveliest cathedral in all Spain.

It seemed scarcely a stone's throw from this cupola to the Gothic spire of the cathedral. Yet this cupola dominated the spire; dwarfing all Toledo—scarcely changed since El Greco painted it, centuries ago, perched on its hump of rock in the whiplash curl of the Tagus—till it seemed little more than a toy city between toy walls.

He looked, over yet more flattened rooves, unscathed and burnished by the hot sunlight, with here and there a belfry rising from them, to the north walls and the double-towered Bisagra gate.

To the right beyond the gate were more houses. He put the fieldglasses to his eyes. Men moved among those houses. Facing them, were trees. Over the tree tops, rose the upper floor of that hospital from which the first shots had been fired at the enemy advancing from Madrid.

That was the road to Madrid, that gleaming ribbon of tarmac, flanked on one side by poplars, switchbacking for the hills.

Such lovely hills—cold gray sierras alternating with the red cultivated lands one had learned to call "*la sagra*" and the cool green of the *cigarrales*—those orchards where the sweet herbs grew and the bees swarmed and the sweet waters gurgled.

Coolth and sweet waters. Gosh, what wouldn't a man give for them. Now.

Here.

§ 4

The voice of the officer at the telescope broke in on Maurice's sentimentalising.

"It looks as though they were going to begin shooting", he said; as the little figures Maurice had seen moving near the house crossed the road, and disappeared under the trees. "The seventy-fives are just at the edge of the wood; the hundred-and-fives just behind it and a little to the left".

Following these directions, Maurice found the guns, the howitzers, the leisurely figures manning them. From one belfry and another, machine guns began to chatter. He could hear the bullets chipping away at the stucco below him.

Then he saw the orange flash at a gun muzzle. The officer at the telescope shouted, "Sound the 'take cover'." The soldier's whistle shrilled. Other whistles answered from the courtyard—and the shell screamed by, burst out of sight in the dust of the Corralillo.

At that short range, the shell-burst and the report of the gun were almost simultaneous.

"He wants at least half a degree more left", said the observation officer. "And what's the use of shooting at a place like this with seventy-fives anyway? They can't do us much harm even with their hundred-and-fives. Except for the out-buildings, of course. Hallo—they're manning the howitzers, too. They must have got some more ammunition."

But the guns and the howitzers were only checking their ranges; and within a quarter of an hour the whistles blew the "all clear".

"Tea time", thought Maurice, handing back the field-glasses—and remembered that in all this place there was no such thing as a spoonful of tea.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-SEVEN

§ 1

CAPTAIN MIGUEL and the others were still being extremely polite ; but their increasing silences signified, to any one who knew Spain as well as Maurice, that they would be happier without his company.

He thanked them with due effusion for an interesting half-hour. The captain smiled, "*No hay de que*". He saluted ; and went, his rifle under his arm.

"A nice fellow", said Captain Miguel then. "He is a grand shot, they say. After all, though, he is a foreigner. And these Reds are still Spaniards. It does not seem quite right to me that *he* should kill them."

The other reserve officer said, "We shall need every man who can shoot, and perhaps the women, in the long run. If only we could get news of Mola's column !"

"Optimist", laughed the gunner who had been at the telescope. "He'll never get through."

§ 2

Meanwhile Maurice had reached the foot of the second-floor staircase ; and stopped there to roll himself another cigarette. It was his hour for visiting Lina. But did he want to see Lina—dirty and ragged with her dirty ragged companions ? Was he in love with her any more ? Could any man stay in love, all his life, with an incurable dope addict ?

Supposing—not that it seemed overlikely—he and she were to get out of this place alive ?

The prospect—faced for the first time—brought on a fit of unutterable depression. He had failed to cure Lina. He always did fail. Look how his painting had deteriorated.

Depression grew. Come to think of it, was he any good at anything? His mother and John might still imagine so. But how little they really knew about him. How little anybody really knew about him—except himself.

His cigarette sputtered out, stinking. He spat it from his mouth, crushed the leaves with his heel, made the next staircase; and so emerged, through a big room where three men sat working at a littered table, into the hot sunshine under the upper arches of the courtyard, all its pillars still standing, the great centre statue of the king in armour still on its pedestal.

Resting his arms on the balustrade, he thought: "It would be easy enough to get out. I should never have got in, except for Lina". But the thought shamed him—for all about this courtyard, now that the all-clear had been given, lounged men, some in the khaki breeches and leggings of the Spanish regular army, others in the gray-green piped with scarlet, the queer shiny black tricorne of the Guardia Civil.

All these men—committed, willy nilly, to the same mad adventure as himself—trusted him. So how the hell could one desert?

"One couldn't", he decided. "Even if there were no Lina. Besides, this is an adventure—the sort of thing I used to dream about when I was a kid. Damn it, I always wanted to be a soldier. And now I am one, even if I haven't a uniform, even if I am so infernally hungry."

Comforted a little, his mercurial temperament already telling him what a grand fellow he was and what tales he would have to tell once they were relieved (for of course they would be relieved) he strolled down, his rifle still under his arm, by the broad marble stairs, to gossip with his fellow adventurers, none of whom ever failed to tell him how well he spoke their language, till the whistle drove them to cover again.

A man who had known war watched how slowly, how nonchalantly, with what an air of, "See how brave I am", Maurice strolled out of the sunshine into the sheltering arcades—and judged him, as an English huntsman had once judged his father, for a fool.

§ 3

Beyond the arcades under which he and the men with whom he had been gossiping ran to the whistle, double doors led to one of the ground floor lecture rooms of the Academy, all its high windows barricaded with rubble-filled sandbags. Between the shell-detonations, Maurice could hear yet another enemy machine gun, chip-chip-chipping at the stone and stucco of the four-foot outer wall.

But already he was so used to this noise that it interested him no more than a woodpecker's pecking might have interested him in the home cover at the Manor; and he continued to think about Lina; till the whistles shrilled again, and he made his way back under the arches, down yet more stone steps into the semi-darkness of the "Catacomb Road".

Occasional pencils of sunshine, piercing its vaulted brick roof, illuminated this so-called road—more like a mine gallery—which under-ran the four walls and the four towers of the main building. Off it, opened cellar after cellar.

A few of these cellars were still to explore. In one, a handful of prisoners were housed. Maurice heard them talking in low voices as he passed the locked door. Then he heard children's chatter, a guitar tinkling; and knew he was approaching the new quarters which had been arranged for the women.

But, first, he had to pass the hospital cellar, and that place—lit only by candles of mule fat—where the two doctors operated as best they might without anæsthetics on the daily casualties. And by these he went quickly—for the thought of physical pain had always been more appalling to him than the thought of death—till a dull gleam showed behind a red curtain, tacked over a brick archway.

"Can one come in?" he called.

A voice answered, "*Venga*". A grubby hand pulled aside the curtain. He went in.

There were more than five hundred women in the Alcazar. This vault, lit only by two dips on the centre table, housed some fifty; none of whom had washed or changed her clothes for many days. It smelt of stale sweat, of exhausted perfumes,

of dirty bedding. Some of the women slept, others whispered together. On one of the many iron bedsteads sat an old lady, rocking herself backwards and forwards as she told the beads at her neck.

"My son", she mumbled. "Mother of God. My son. Take him though he died unshriven." For in all this place, there was no priest.

§ 4

At the very end of the vault, in a low niche of brickwork to which hardly a glimmer of light penetrated, stood the last of the bedsteads. One young woman bent over this. Another lay on it.

"Your wife is better", said the one woman, straightening herself and turning to Maurice. "I will leave you alone with her."

She drew away from the bed. Lina lifted herself from the hard pillow. Even by that ghost of a light, Maurice could perceive how little the years, and the drug, had left of her beauty. Only the eyes—huge in that wasted face—were the eyes of the Lina he had married. Her very voice had changed to a thin croak.

"Sit down", she said in English. "Put your arms round me. I have been very lonely all day. The shells frighten me so."

He rested his rifle against the wall; perched himself at the edge of the mattress. His arm circled a skeleton. Once—he remembered—she had been *fausse maigre*.

"There's nothing to be frightened of", he told her. "The shells are only little ones. You're perfectly safe down here."

"I am not afraid when you're with me. I don't think I'm afraid for myself at all. I shouldn't mind dying. It would be better that way."

"Nonsense."

But was it? Wouldn't it be better that Lina should die? If those months in the mountains had not cured her of the craving, nothing would.

She seemed to perceive the last of his thoughts.

"We ought to have stayed in the Pyrenees", she went on. "I couldn't have got *it* there. But I always wanted it. It's my

god, you see. You can't understand that. You can't understand going down on your knees and praying to a bottle—a silly little bottle with some white powder in it. It's the powder one prays to, of course. Because it gives one back one's dreams."

He took his arm from her. He said roughly, "Well, it's no good thinking you'll get any more of the stuff here. You couldn't buy it here if you had all the money in the world".

She croaked, "I'm sorry I stole your money. You've always been so good to me. I really do love you. I really did try. Won't you forgive me?"

He put his arm round her again. She began to cry. He felt that all the others were watching them. He bent his mouth to her ear whispering, "There's nothing to forgive. I'm not even angry with you".

How brittle her hair was. How vilely it smelt.

Her whole body smelt. Could one love the unclean? Hadn't he done enough for this woman? Did he want to die for her? Wouldn't it be better if she died? He *could* desert then. Why shouldn't he? This wasn't his war. None of these people were his people. They were only a lot of fanatics anyway. They called the other side revolutionaries. But weren't they the real revolutionaries, taking up arms against their own government?

"You were angry in Madrid", went on Lina. "That was why I tried to kill myself. If anything were to happen to you, I should kill myself. You're the only thing that keeps me alive. If ever we get out of here, I'll try again. I'll try so hard. Honestly I will, my sweet. I'll make you love me all over again. We'll have such wonderful times. You'll paint such wonderful pictures."

It was nearly dinner time—the garrison still took its three meals a day—before he left her. His own dinner, eaten with his detachment in the ground floor room where they still slept, consisted of mule stew and the last of the chick peas. The warm water in the thick glass tasted worse than ever. His opposite number gave him a cigarette made of eucalyptus leaves. Just before they went on duty again, he staggered out into the courtyard, choking back his first attack of nausea.

The guns were quiet that night ; even rifle shots few. The town seemed to be celebrating some kind of a fiesta. From their loophole, they heard songs, music. As always, the lights they could see infuriated them. If only their own electricity supply had not been cut off. If only the first aeroplane bombs had not destroyed the water-pumping machinery.

"We could get the field radio working if they could tap a main", grumbled the cadet, just before they were relieved.

"I could sleep like you do if I weren't so thirsty", grumbled Maurice, as they came off duty ; and sleepless he went out by that curved passage which ringed the foot of the south east tower.

§ 5

It was thirty-six hours since Maurice had last been outside the walls. Standing there, in the shadow of the great square tower, he felt as though he had emerged from prison. Damn it all, this Alcazar was a prison, inside which only a fool would stay voluntarily. So the sooner he escaped from it the better.

If only one picked one's moment, it should be easy enough !

All along the wall between the south east and the north west tower, as close under the projecting battlements as possible, were parked those lorries on to which a handful of resolute men had piled the ammunition boxes, while the commandant of the three-mile-distant arms factory still held parley with the Red advance guard.

One of those lorries had been wrecked by an aeroplane bomb. He conceived the mad idea of starting-up the one beside it, of driving that lorry headlong across the gravel of this terrace, round the angle of machicolated walling, and down the roadway to the stables. But already, he knew, trenches had been dug, barricades thrown up at the foot of the roadway ; and beyond, where the paving stones twisted flat past the high walls of the stables and the main outbuilding, were iron gates.

And anyway, the idea was a mad one. Because, in all these black windows, were eyes.

Maurice could almost feel those eyes, boring into his back as he lounged out across the gravel and began picking the last

few leaves of one of the acacias which grew by the machicolated walling of the cadets' parade ground, known as the "Esplanade". Then, very clearly, he heard—from the wrecked riding school just below him—the sound of the picks.

Another grave. They dug them every night. Soon, one of the officers would read prayers. Mumbo Jumbo! As though it were any use praying for the dead.

The picks were silent. The prayers began. Mingling with the words, he heard the chuckle of the unseen river where it narrowed through the gorge.

Another scheme flickered through his mind. It would be easy enough to reach the river. One had only to sneak down, through the riding school, over that other wall. Three hundred yards—less—of scrambling, and one would emerge on the bank between the two bridges. Dead ground, that. Thank goodness, he'd always been a good swimmer. He would have to swim under water for a bit, till he was past the lower bridge. The Reds would be sure to have a guard there.

But once past New Bridge and round the bend, there was more dead ground. He could scramble out somewhere, make for open country.

§ 6

The prayers ceased while Maurice was still meditating his last scheme. He moved to the battlement at the end of the esplanade wall. He watched the burial party leave the riding school; steal across the shadows, by the holed building which had once been the cadets' dining hall, towards the house of the Capucines. He crouched closer to the brickwork. The officer who had read the burial service passed within six feet of him; entered the Alcazar.

"Now," he thought. "Now or never." But again, as he stole forward, those eyes seemed to be boring into his back.

A few noiseless strides, and he was under cover, treading over tan, over brick, over the smashed glass of the fallen riding school roof, past the newly dug grave. From the adjoining barrack came the low sound of voices. They must be changing guard there. If they spotted him, it would mean a bullet.

He stood stock still, listening to the pump of his own breath, till the voices stopped.

Shells had torn great gaps through the far wall of the riding school. He gained the wall; clambered through one of the gaps. Fifty yards more across the gravel, and he would reach the outer fortifications. He had only to haul himself up; drop down. Even if they heard him, the barrack guards wouldn't have time to shoot.

Once more, he stood stock still, listening to the chuckle of the river, measuring his distance. There was a patch of moonlight between him and that last low wall he must scale. All the better. One would be less likely to stumble.

"Blast!"

Already, as the involuntary ejaculation broke from him, Maurice was flat on his face with the enemy machine-gun bullets hammering at the bricks. Then the gun began to traverse, and, lifting his head, he could see the flashes, tiny tongues of red flame from the ruined castle beyond the river.

Queerly, he remembered himself visiting that castle, climbing its battlements with Lina, strolling back with her, arm in arm, across the old bridge of Alcantara.

The whistling bullets swept the roadway from the esplanade to the stables. He could see them striking blue sparks from the stonework of the barricades at the foot of the roadway. From the convent beyond the main outbuilding, another enemy gun began to chatter. He could not see the flashes of that gun; but he could hear the rifles of the sentries answering it—crack, crack, crack. He looked back and up to where the main building seemed to frown, silent and menacing, the spears of its four enormous cupolas silvered by the moonlight. He seemed to hear a voice calling from one of those cupolas, "*Que baces aqui?*"

"Just taking a *paseo*", his own voice seemed to be answering.

Then, amazingly, at the back of his mind, he was aware of a third voice, saying in English, "It's war all right, young feller-me-lad, and your Uncle Rupert will be in it. So you'd like to come with me, eh? You'd like to be my trumpeter. Regular little sportsman, aren't you?"

Sportsman. . . . Good God.

All three voices were cut off. Almost at once, the firing stopped. But Maurice Carteret still lay where the bullets had halted him, all this present scene wiped from his mind. And now, through the arches of his mind, strode two figures—a man's figure and a boy's.

The figures were so sharp in his memory that Maurice could actually see the man's curled moustache and the tanned skin at the neck of the boy's open shirt. He could see the newspapers they were carrying, and the bookstall at which the man had bought those newspapers, and the headline, "War by Midnight?"

The man and the boy climbed into a car. They vanished. But not before he had recognised the boy for himself; not before he had read the thought in the boy's mind, "Cousin Rupert's the most wonderful man I ever met. He called me a regular little sportsman. I will be that. Always".

And here was this very boy, grown to full manhood, a proven coward, almost a deserter.

Almost.

Not quite though.

One could still go back . . .

CHAPTER EIGHTY-EIGHT

§ 1

. . . NEVERTHELESS, it took a full half-hour before Maurice Carteret made up his mind to go back ; and even then it seemed as though someone else had made up his mind for him, as though he were returning to prison against his own will.

For if one merely consulted one's own will—or even one's reason—this decision appeared as involuntary as it was senseless.

Why had one taken this decision then ? Because one still loved Lina ? Definitely, no.

That—curiously enough—was quite definite. One could still conceive of a duty towards Lina. One could—one did—pity Lina. But physically one could only feel repugnance. She was so ugly. She was so dirty. Could one love a woman if one couldn't even kiss her without an inward shudder ?

Besides, he'd done enough—more than enough—for Lina. She couldn't live much longer anyway. She might just as well die in that cellar as anywhere else. So why must he risk dying—worse still, being maimed, crippled, blinded perhaps—to stay with her ?

Yet stay he must, if only because of that one memory, because a man long dead had once called him a "regular little sportsman". For other reasons, too !

Climbing back through the breach in the riding school wall, making his stealthy way up the slope, round the bomb-hole in the parade ground, Maurice's mind vouchsafed him a glimpse of those reasons. John had not been afraid to risk his life in battle. Neither had Philip. How then could he show himself afraid—who had always envied those two their war experiences ?

Wasn't this a chance—the one chance—of proving himself as good a man as the “head of the family”?

Besides, what would his mother say, how would she regard him, if ever it were to transpire that he had deserted from a fight like this?

“She'd never speak to me again”, he decided; and, as he re-entered his prison, “Even if nobody ever found out, I should despise myself.”

For as yet only vanity inspired him to courage. As yet there was nothing of the true soldier in him. All his life, selfdelusion had been his god—and of that god he continued worshipful for many nights and many days.

§ 2

Very terrible, for the women in cellars of the Alcazar—the women whom Spanish orientalism forbade even to tend their wounded sons or husbands—were all those nights and all those days. For with the full moon there broke the first of the bombardments—storm after storm of shell that forbade sleep.

Forty mortal hours went by before even the children could sleep, so incessant were the detonations, and the crash of the falling masonry above their little heads.

And, two days later, aeroplane propellers beat high over those little heads, and little ears heard the “Wham, wham, wham” of those bombs that wrecked the house of the Capucines.

Tear-gas bombs fell in the courtyard that day; and men without masks threw sand on those bombs, saturated the sand with petrol and set it alight.

But four died and twelve were wounded in the wreck of the house of the Capucines; and from the following dawn until siesta time—with every enemy rifle, every enemy machine gun raining bullets at the barred windows—the whole garrison stood to arms, expectant of the grand attack.

There was no attack. Yet by then—had it not been for the wheat sacks men toted, at risk of their lives, from that secret store (of which secret word had come) below the riding school terrace—there would have been no bread. Of sugar they

had no more, and of coffee they had no more. And of the tinned milk only enough was left for the children.

Only twice in every twenty-four hours could they eat now—those thousand men and those five hundred women. Of water, for all purposes, they were limited to a wine-bottle-full a day. And day after day no news from the outer world reached them. For though devoted bands, creeping out by night, sought ceaselessly, they could not tap the electric mains which would have set the radio working.

Neither could they find any but a few scraps of food.

There is many a gay jest about food in the early numbers of that single sheet, mimeographed daily in the old orderly room of the gentlemen cadets, which served the garrison for news. But with the waning of the first moon there was little of real laughter left, even in the stoutest heart.

For, with moon wane, blazed the first searchlights; the first attack.

Rifle and machine-gun fire preluded that attack. Then the searchlights were extinguished; and the handful of boys in the main outbuilding, blinded by the sudden darkness, heard the hiss of the sprayed petrol. Then bombs and lighted rags kindled the petrol—and desperate men swarming out of the Plaza Zocodover, out of Santa Cruz and through the gates of the convent of the Immaculate Conception, flung themselves at the stables and the main outbuilding . . .

But that first attack the boys—the grooms and the batmen of the cadets, nearly all of whom were on holiday—smashed with their rifles; and that day a sortie party from the wrecked house of the Capucines had returned with a few packets of chocolate and two bags of lentils and nearly five thousand cigarettes made of real tobacco.

And later that night, with the rifles and machine guns quiet—though the searchlights still flickered up and down the façades—the garrison of the Alcazar had their first word from the world without.

§ 3

Maurice Carteret happened to be there, in that room—lit only by one flickering dip of mule fat, where, for nearly a

month now, a man with blazing eyes and the fingers of a skeleton had been experimenting with the batteries taken from the lorries and the field-wireless set brought in by one of the Civic Guards—when first the ear phones and then the loud speaker carried word from the world without.

And because this news, broadcast from Madrid—that the Alcazar was on the point of surrender, a wreck of a fortress in which only a few starving young madmen still held a few unwilling women captive—seemed so utterly beside the mark, Maurice and the rest who were in that room laughed once more.

But the next night, though the man with the blazing eyes picked up, first from Oporto and then from Turin, the news that they were not alone against the enemy, terror began to spread through the cellars.

For that night first one woman and then another awoke to ask her neighbour, "What was that? Did you hear it? Listen?"

And the next night, listening tense to those faint far noises underneath their own cellar, the young woman who shared the bed with Lina whispered,

"Puede ser una mina. It might be a mine".

CHAPTER EIGHTY-NINE

§ 1

"*Una noche Toledana*", said the officer of the Guardia Civic as he and Maurice lay, bellies to ground, under what the new 6-inch siege guns had left of the north wall, listening to the tearing rattles of rifle and machine-gun fire from the main outbuilding and that alley leading to it which they knew as "Stable Approach".

And :

"This city has known many massacres", went on Maurice's companion ; "but that, I think, was the worst."

He told the tale, which is more than a thousand years old—of the Day of the Ditch, as history calls it, and the voice crying, "Men of Toledo, I vow that yonder vapour is not the smoke of a feast but rises from the blood of our butchered brethren", as the hidden scimitars severed head after head from the body.

"Maybe on this very spot", he hazarded ; and, because the need for speech was on him, he told another and yet another tale of old Toledo where, "Our Laras and our Castros fleshed their rapiers nightly—being very like those Montagues and Capulets of whom your Shakespeare tells", and to which, "Came our King Ferdinand to hang many and boil others alive in cauldrons.

"For we Spaniards", he continued, "have always had a streak of cruelty in us, as you saw for yourself but yesterday when we watched those poor priests being shot against the cathedral wall."

And after that he told still another story—of how Maria de Pacheco, the wife of Juan de Padilla, held all Toledo through sixteen months of warfare, and cut her way safe to Portugal when, at long last, "this Alcazar" fell.

"But it won't fall this time", he concluded. "Listen. Those lads must have beaten them off again."

"It certainly sounds like it", said Maurice—wondering, not for the first time, whence this man, and so many others, drew their faith.

The rifle fire died away. The officer of the Guard rose, scratched himself, stretched himself, said, "*Hasta luego*", and hobbled off, one bandaged leg trailing behind the other. His belly still to the ground, Maurice ruminated a while. Then he rolled over, looked up at the full moon.

So many things—so many terrible things—had happened since the last full moon. Fight after fight. Bombardment after bombardment. Half the pillars in this courtyard were cracked clean across. Several had fallen. Every archway tottered. These solid walls were crumbling away. Yet the four cupolas still stood. And the great central stairway. And every outbuilding was still held.

If only the promised help could reach them before the Reds exploded their mine.

Tonight, the guns were not firing; so that one heard one's enemies, all too clearly, at work in the mine. Pneumatic drills, they were using now. One could imagine the things, rather like giant dentists' drills, eating away at the rock below the cellars. But one must not even think of the tunnel below the cellars. Because that way lay madness.

Every way of thought led to madness, unless one had faith.

And he, Maurice Carteret, could not win to faith. He could not pray, as nearly every one of his comrades prayed, in that chapel where the home-made dips they could so ill spare burned before the image of the Virgin. He could not cross himself, as they all crossed themselves, when he passed under that plaque of porcelain, still unscathed between the torn machicolations of the two little towers on the esplanade wall.

It was by grace of that plaque—said his comrades—that the bullets had spared them on that moonless night when they had stumbled up the roadway from the main outbuilding, leading most of the mules and the horses, and stabled them safely in the cellars.

Mumbo Jumbo again. And yet, could one be sure?

§ 2

There seemed so little—thought Maurice, rolling over again—of which one could be sure.

It must be ten whole days now since that friendly aeroplane had stooped screaming over the esplanade; since they had rushed out, disdainful of ill-aimed bullets; since they had dragged that tin trunk, with its few packages of carefully wrapped foodstuffs, with its two letters, into the courtyard. It must be three days—no, four—since they had picked up any reassuring message on the radio. And much longer than that, ever so much longer, since one's first "opposite number", the boy Juan, had fallen back from his loophole, muttering, just before the blood choked him, "*Viva España*".

Viva España. But was it for Spain that Juan had died, or for something that transcended mere patriotism?

"I wish I knew", thought Maurice; and from that his thoughts drifted, as they so often drifted nowadays, towards home.

They must be wondering what had happened to him—there at home. They might even be a little worried about him. He could imagine his mother saying, "I wonder why his letters have stopped"; and John, "I shouldn't fret. He'll turn up again".

"Like a bad penny", John might be saying. No. That wasn't fair. He and John weren't going to quarrel any more. Jolly decent, John had been about making one that allowance. And jolly sympathetic about Lina.

His poor devil of a Lina. She was always so hungry. Yesterday's bombardment—the crash and smash of the falling pillars—had been almost too much for her. She would have screamed if he hadn't clapped his hand over her mouth.

All those poor devils of women. Worst for them. They had nothing to do. Except pray.

Why the hell couldn't he pray? He ought to be able to—if Lina could. Queer, how religious she'd gone. It seemed to help her. It seemed to help everybody, except himself.

They could never stick the noise of these drills otherwise. God damn the drills. They were noisier than ever tonight.

They seemed to be right under one. A nice end, to be blown sky-high or buried alive when the last of these walls came crashing down. What a fool he'd been not to go while the going was good.

Yes. A fool.

"*Viva España*" or "Holy Virgin protect us". Patriotism or religion. They were both parrot cries. A fellow only lived once. His first—his only—duty was to himself. Radio-Madrid had been quite right. He and his fellow prisoners were just a lot of "starving madmen".

So why go through with this madness? Why not blow one's brains out with one's own rifle before the mine went up? A man had done that yesterday. And another man the day before. He knew, because he'd helped to bury both of them—secretly—in what was left of the riding school.

Rather flattering, really, the way these foreigners trusted one with their secrets. They wouldn't think so well of one if one committed suicide. They would say one had played the coward.

Damn it, he couldn't play the coward. He was the only Englishman in the whole place, though Lina had pinned one of the new red and yellow rosettes at the lapel of his jacket.

A perfect disgrace, this jacket. These trousers, too. And these shoes.

He looked like a scarecrow. They all looked like scarecrows. And how they stank. Weeks since any of them had even been able to wash their hands and faces, far less have a bath.

Gosh, what wouldn't he give for just one bath, just not to have to scratch himself all the time.

Maurice's thoughts wandered again, to a studio flat in Paris, to a restaurant in Vienna, to the picture-hung dining room at the Manor—finally, to the wartime camp where he, enlisted under age, ate three huge meals every day of his life and wore a khaki tunic, a warm overcoat, a pair of stout boots.

For the heats of August and July were over; and one's belly was as good as empty; and as one lay here in the shadow of this wrecked wall, one could feel the cold of the false dawn goosefleshing all one's body.

Such joy, he had always had of his body. How he wanted those joys again.

§ 3

For a little Maurice slept the sleep of utter exhaustion. But a renewed rattle of rifle fire woke him ; and he staggered to his feet.

The sky told him that it would soon be dawn. He looked up at the north east cupola. Below it, shells had torn and torn at the solid masonry, until, from here, one could see clean through the tower.

"Have it down before long", he thought. "Have 'em all down. Wonder which way they'll fall."

He consulted his watch ; rejoined his detachment, snoring in the dark under their horse blankets. Light crept through the high window. He woke his third "opposite number"—a giant of a man in the soiled gray-green with the red piping. The man asked, "Don't you ever sleep, *Ingles* ?"

"*De vez en cuando*", answered Maurice.

"From time to time is not enough. You should sleep more. We shall need all our strength before we are through with this job. Besides, one dreams. I dreamed that I was at a *corrida* and that they gave me the first bull to eat."

They took their rifles ; and went out to the wall from the still unwrecked classroom. Their two comrades, one watchful behind the rubble-filled sandbags, the other smoking a cigarette of eucalyptus leaves, reported all quiet on the north terrace. During the night, they had made themselves some head cover. Maurice saw that the barricades on the left had also been strengthened, with fallen stones, with some rusty steel plates.

Farther to their left, a huge portion of wall still clung, undamaged, to the shaken buttress of the north west tower.

Their two comrades went off to sleep. The sky was growing lighter and lighter. Soon, peering over his sights, Maurice could just make out the red flag on the convent tower. A shadow moved by the flag. Automatically he fired at it. As he jerked out the cartridge case, a hand fell on his shoulder ; a voice ordered, "Don't waste ammunition" ; and the sergeant of the Guard continued on his round.

Maurice's opposite number cackled, "He was always economical—that one". Light continued to grow. A few

bullets zipped over. The same officer who had told the stories of old Toledo climbed the heap of broken masonry ; squinted up and sideways at the north east cupola.

"You should be safe enough here", he said.

Another half-hour went by. The sun had risen behind them. The sun climbed higher. Its light crept across north terrace, touched the convent roof, the red flag there. Then the whistles blew ; the first of the big shells screamed, burst with a crash that seemed to split Maurice's right ear drum.

Dazed, he heard the fall of brickwork.

"Just under the cupola", called his opposite number. The figure by the red flag was visible again; but before Maurice could fire at it, dust blinded him, a second big shell screamed, a third, a fourth.

He felt a tug at his feet. His opposite number was pulling him backwards. "They can't attack while this is going on. *Jesus Cristo*, look !"

For the last shell had stripped the lower tiling from the cupola so that they could see the sun shining through the naked steel of the supporting ties.

Complete silence followed. It seemed to Maurice that the cupola was already teetering. Imaginatively, he saw the base of the tower lean towards them, lean over them.

"We're *not* safe", said his imagination. "We shall be buried under it." And, queerly, he remembered one of the tree-fellers who had come to the Manor just after the war, shouting, "Don't you stand that way of her, young master. Her'll fall on you".

Then four shells screamed simultaneously ; and all thoughts, all memories, were blown clean out of him in one hurricane of crazy fear.

He could have run for this fear. But there could be no escape by running. He could have cried out for this fear. But before he could even open his mouth, he was blinded, deafened, blasted almost insensible, nothing except that one prayer in his subconscious mind.

"Save me", prayed his subconscious mind ; and again he heard the slide and crash of the falling brickwork.

But the cupola, when at long last he dared to look up at it,

was still there. Not for another half-hour, and every minute of that half-hour punctuated by the blinding, deafening blasts of the high explosive—did the skeleton bulk of it begin to tilt, very slowly, first one steel girder snapping and then another.

Then, still very slowly, the spear head of the vane canted over, canted away from them.

"*Cae*", said the voice of Maurice's comrade. "*Cae*."

And the whole bulk of the cupola toppled—fell.

§ 4

No particular shell-explosion seemed to signal that fall. A second's utter silence seemed to precede, to follow it. But while one still remembered the triple clang as of a huge iron ball bouncing, while one still stared up at the jagged throat of the decapitated tower, one heard the shouts of cheering, louder and louder, then the beat of a drum, the blowing of a trumpet.

Maurice, scrambling back to his post, could actually see the sun flash on that trumpet, and the many men who had rushed out on to the flat roofs of the convent waving their berets.

But he could only make out the heads and the arms of those men. The three round the red flag made the better target. He loosed off his whole magazine at them; charged it again as they dropped to cover, and began to fire back at him.

Blast them. He'd teach them to cheer just because they'd knocked one cupola over. He'd show them he wasn't afraid of a few shells.

And yet, with the cheering died down at last, and the rifles quieter, and the guns going again, fear returned; and that noon-day, for the second time, Maurice's subconscious mind prayed, "Save me. Save me"; and, back in his quarters after their relief, drinking his pannikin of lukewarm water, cracking the unleavened roll with his rifle butt before he softened it in the horse stew, this prayer grew conscious, mingling with the explosion of trench-mortar bombs on the north terrace, and the shrieks of children, the lamentations of a crazed woman from the cellars below.

Maybe she was right, that woman of his in the cellars

below. Maybe God did exist, and His Son, and His Mother, the Virgin. Maybe all these various saints of whom his comrades implored assistance could be of use to a fellow when he couldn't sleep any more for fear the mine would blow up and bury him, for fear the towers would fall and crush him, for fear he should play the coward among these foreigners

Damn it, he'd always despised foreigners.

But, then, if it came to that he had always despised people who believed in God.

"God Himself perhaps?" asked some inner voice; and, immediately, another voice answered:

"It doesn't seem too safe to despise God here. You might have to meet Him fairly soon".

§ 5

Maurice Carteret tried to scoff at both those voices. Nevertheless they continued to haunt him—all that day the first cupola fell, and all that night.

CHAPTER NINETY

§ 1

It had been the worst of all the garrison's days. That afternoon the chemical laboratory had been set on fire by the petrol sprays ; and from long before dusk the big guns and the little had started hammering them again, ceasing only at nightfall. But that night had been even worse than that day. For soon, all the outbuildings might go—and this meant that every man of the whole garrison who was not on sentry duty must labour, either at barricade building, or trench digging, or toting the wheat sacks.

So by dawn those two voices in the soul of Maurice Carteret were silenced. He did not hear them again until siesta time—and then only very faintly, through the haze of sleep.

He went to Lina after his sleep. The old lady had died in the night. A child had been born during the morning's bombardment. She spoke of these things calmly. He was aware of a complete change in her.

"I'm not frightened any more", she said. "I shan't scream again. It's so silly to be frightened. After all, you're not."

"No", he lied. "No."

She talked of the drug next.

"I believe I'm cured", she said. "I never even think of it. There's so much else to think of. Will they send a priest before they make an end of us? I should like that. We all would."

He lied again, "They're not going to make an end of us, as you call it. We've got enough food and enough ammunition to hold on for at least another month. Long before then this man Franco will have come to our rescue".

She told the beads the woman who shared her bed had given her.

"If God wills", she said ; and just before he left her, "Doña Isabella spoke of you during the night. She said how

wonderful it is that you, who have no belief, can be so brave . . . I am so proud of you, Maurice. And so grateful. No other man would have gone on loving me as you have done . . . It is for me that you have been fighting all these weeks . . . That's true, isn't it?"

And again he lied, "Yes, my darling. Only for you"; again he thought what a fine chivalrous fellow he was, what a knight errant, what a soldier, what an adventurer, as he stumbled away, out of that foetid cellar, past that vault where the wounded lay moaning, and that other vault where they butchered the mules and the horses . . .

Until the inner voices began speaking once more :

"A fine fellow indeed. You would have deserted—if you'd dared—weeks ago. Why didn't you dare? Only because you were afraid of what people might say if they ever found out that you'd played the coward. Try telling God what a fine fellow you are. Deceive Lina, deceive yourself as much as you like. But you won't deceive Him, because He knows you for a coward and a liar; and that the only thing which has kept you here is your vanity".

"Your infernal vanity", repeated the voices.

But the first of the afternoon's guns silenced them. Nor—consciously at any rate—did Maurice Carteret hear them again for many more days.

Something of faith had come to him, but he did not recognise it for faith. All he knew—consciously—was that he had ceased, for the very first time in his existence, to think about himself.

§ 2

To the man who had ceased to think about himself, that day and that night, the next day and the next night and the day after, were all one day and one night, through which he went dazed but scathless, and curiously unafraid.

Even the noises of the mine—while that mood lasted—failed to make him afraid; though now, at every pause in the shelling, one could hear the dim rumble of the exploding charges followed by the griding hiss of the drills.

Those drills were nearing the foundations of the south west

tower. The women could scarcely sleep for the noise they made. The last piece of wall which had clung to the north west tower was down, mere crags of rubble up which one clambered to one's post; and every cloister in the courtyard now tottered on its pillars; and every door that led into the courtyard had been torn from its hinges by the aeroplane bombs; and only by dint of unceasing labour could the path up the wreck of the great stairway be kept clear for the sentries who still watched from their loopholes and the observers who watched from their towers.

All day the bullets chipped the stone at those loopholes, and most of the day the shells battered at those towers, and most of the night one laboured at the trenches or the barricades or the wheat-toting, with nothing to relieve the monotonous round of these duties save an occasional sortie, an occasional enemy attack on this outbuilding or the other outbuilding; and one great counter-attack by the citadel garrison.

But exactly on which night they had made that counter-attack on the main outbuilding, sweeping the enemy from it, saving all but the last of the few precious mules, the few precious horses that were still stabled there, Maurice and his opposite number could not remember as they watched the shells battering and battering at the foot of that other tower.

Since a little after daylight, they had been watching—through this barred window at ground level—the black fissure in the gray stones of that tower; and now the fissure seemed to gape wider with every shell-burst.

"*Cae*", said Maurice to his opposite number.

"Not today."

"I will bet you five pesetas it falls before they bring us our food."

"Done with you, *amigo*."

But yet another four and twenty mortal hours of hunger and thirst and incessant labour were by before the north west tower trembled on its rock base; staggered and dropped crashing—a ship's weight of steel and masonry—across that slope of street down which Maurice had seen the young soldiers marching for the Plaza Zocodover . . .

How long ago?

§ 3

Even while the whole Alcazar rocked and reverberated to that last appalling crash, even while the solid ground rippled under his ill-shod feet and the dust cones rose like giant mushrooms against the Castilian sunshine—even while the first shrieks of the children broke from the cellars and his detachment grabbed for their rifles—Maurice caught himself trying to remember how long ago it was since that peaceful morning when he had sat sipping his coffee in the Bar Goya.

Because, a moment before the crash—worn out with the night's fatigue duties—he had been asleep.

But now, once again, the drums and the trumpets and the cheering and the honking motor horns of the triumphing enemies had murdered sleep; and all that afternoon, through the loophole of his pit in the wreck of the north wall, he saw the red flags waving, and heard the bombs bursting, the rifles crackling, the machine guns chattering.

Until, with the dusk, a strange hush fell over all the town; until, an hour and a half after nightfall, a voice was heard, calling from the town, calling from loophole to loophole across that blood-soaked alley by the house of the Capucines.

And all the rest of that night—because the voice had asked for a parley—the only sounds men heard were the chuckle of the river, or a loose stone falling from a ruined archway, or the griding of the drills.

Now and again, the griding would stop; and, if no brick fell at that moment, one might just guess the thud of the charge exploding. But in the dawn-still the chatter of the drills seemed ceaseless; so that few could sleep for thinking of them. And with the first light Maurice crept out of prison again, by the same way he had come on that night when it had been in him to desert.

Shells had almost barred that way; and beyond those heaps of brick which one had called the "Curved Passage", barricades rose, sheltering the trench one had helped to dig along the wall of the esplanade.

There were only wrecks of lorries on this esplanade. At the far end of it, an irregular hill of rubble—halfway of which,

upside down, sprawled the open iron bowl of the north east cupola—blocked one's view of the burnt laboratory and the iron footbridge that led to the shell of the main outbuilding.

A place of destruction. Yet queerly this place was home.

With a word to the sentry there, Maurice climbed over the barricade ; stood, arms folded, to watch the sun rise across the river ; and as he looked it seemed to him that all those sloping lands beyond the river, and the battlements of that castle from which—how long ago ?—he had watched the enemy gunners run panic-stricken under the sudden hail of their own rifle fire—were being painted with El Greco's own colours, the gray-greens and the crimsons, the ashen whites and the blacks.

"Art", he thought in those moments. "But *I* never really lived for it. It was just a pleasure, or a means of livelihood. I've only lived for selfgratification. That was all my love for any woman meant to me. Even my love for Lina didn't mean much more."

Yet because his love for Lina had meant just a little more than mere selfgratification, it seemed to him—in those moments—as though it had returned. And with that seeming, there came to him another—that, all these last weeks, the hand of God had been laid on both of them, that this way of suffering, of hunger and thirst and sleeplessness and terror, was the way of redemption, even if it should lead to death.

"For maybe", he thought, "there is some existence beyond death. Maybe all those poor chaps we buried in the riding school are still watching us."

And so thinking, he made his way back into the ruined courtyard, waiting there, as hundreds of other skeletons waited, for the man who should come among them.

But when, with the sun now high, that man came—blindfolded through the waggon gate in the west wall—there was no hope in the minds of the skeletons, and only hatred in their eyes.

"*Renegado*", Maurice heard one—that middle-aged officer of the reserve whom he had met (how long ago ?) with the tower guard—hissing ; and another, the last of the cadets, "Major Escarlata. The red major. He is well named, I think" ; and a third, one of the civilian volunteers, "If *I* had been trained in

this Academy, as he was, I should be ashamed to come on such a mission”.

“Probably he’s being well paid for it”, whispered a fourth ; and to Maurice it appeared as though the man with the bandage over his eyes must have overheard. For his head went up, and his shoulders squared as his two guards steered him by.

And after that no more words were spoken for many minutes, till a voice called from the top of the great stairway : “*El Ingles*. Where is he ? The commander wishes to speak with the *Ingles*”.

“*Viva Inglaterra*”, said one then ; and because it seemed to Maurice that those words had been spoken ironically—as a man may speak, even to a tried comrade, under the stress of overwhelming emotion—his head, also, went up, and his shoulders also were squared, as he picked his way round the plinth of the statue, by the heap of rubble at the foot of the great stairway, and so into that wreck of a room.

§ 4

There was no daylight in that wreck of a room. The one dip in its tin sconce on the vast desk hardly illuminated the faces of the three men there, two seated, one on his feet.

“The commander thought it his duty that we should send for you, Señor Carteret”, said the man on his feet. “This”—an ineffable scorn accentuated the next word—“gentleman has made certain proposals to us.”

“Proposals”—interrupted the commander of the garrison—“which have been, needless to say, refused.”

Mosccardó spoke, as was his habit, slowly, almost in a whisper, one hand at his bearded chin.

“This gentleman”—he went on, and again Maurice sensed the scorn—“has promised us our lives and the lives of our womenfolk if we will surrender. Being Spaniards, we cannot accept that gift. But your case is different. You are an Englishman—your wife, therefore, an Englishwoman. To both of you, at my request, a special safe conduct is offered. Immediately, if you so wish.”

“Subject to one condition”—this time it was the man on

his feet who interrupted—"that you give us your word of honour not to disclose anything you know of our defences."

The red major spoke for the first time.

"As though we should ask him to", he protested; and he took out his cigarette case, made to offer it.

"Please do not smoke your own", said Colonel Moscardó. "You will find these acacia leaves most palatable."

He pushed a box of roughly rolled tubes across the desk. The cigarette case shut with a snap.

"*Gracias*," said the red major. He took up one of the tubes, balanced it between clean fingertips. Colonel Moscardó leaned across the desk to offer him a match.

The red major lit up.

"Well, Señor Carteret", he went on, "I await your decision."

Just for a second—to be outside, to be safe, to have a case full of real cigarettes in one's pocket!—Maurice hesitated. For a few seconds longer—as many real cigarettes as one could possibly smoke, clean fingers, a clean body!—his dark eyes looked from one man to the other.

Then—and he too spoke slowly, almost in a whisper—he said, "I am under Colonel Moscardó's orders, sir". And because that was the very first time since he had grown to manhood that Maurice Carteret had ever admitted himself subservient to any man's orders, there was a peculiar joy, and a peculiar peace in his heart, as he continued:

"If he orders me to accept your offer of safe conduct, I must do so. But if the matter is left to my own inclination, there can be no question of acceptance".

A long silence followed. The red major broke it.

"So there is nothing I can do", he said.

"Except send us a priest", said Colonel Moscardó.

§ 5

. . . But it was not until another eight and forty mortal hours had gone by—and no sleep possible for any minute of those hours—that the priest who wore no robes walked, crucifix in hand, by that blood-soaked alley below the house of the Capucines to the waggon gate of the Alcazar.

CHAPTER NINETY-ONE

§ 1

THAT peculiar joy and that peculiar peace which had come on him when he refused safe conduct were still uppermost in the heart of Maurice Carteret, as he watched the priest carrying his crucifix pass slowly across the courtyard and disappear under the ruined archway towards the chapel.

Yet that this man in the blue suit with the red tie knotted through the soft collar was God's appointed, he could not believe. And next to Maurice, in the hush of that September morning, among those thousand men and women whose flesh scarcely clung to their bones, stood another who found it difficult to believe; who whispered:

"I know him. He is from the cathedral in Madrid. Why have they not sent us a holy father from our own cathedral? You know, Englishman. Because you saw the Reds shooting those holy fathers".

Nevertheless—after the two babies had been baptized in the chapel—that other attended Mass there, and took the Communion. Of all the garrison, only Maurice and the wounded still on their pallets in the cellars did not partake of that bread.

For that morning even the outbuildings were left unguarded; and after Communion had been taken the priest who wore no robes spoke to the whole garrison, to the men and the women and the children, from that plinth on which the statue of an earthly king still stood in his armour.

But to Maurice it seemed that he spoke more as a politician than as a priest.

Of death, he spoke—as though death, for all of them, were certain. Of wickedness, he spoke—as though they alone were wicked.

"These walls that still remain", he thundered, "will fall upon you, and you shall perish under them, because your hearts have been hardened, because of your pride." And to Maurice it was a marvel that these skeletons of men and women and children—who had forgone even their miserable scraps of food as faith bade them—should listen to him so raptly; should kneel, there among the rubble, while he lifted his crucifix, while he pronounced the General Absolution.

Maurice Carteret knelt with those men, those women and those children. But only—it seemed to him—out of courtesy. For this creed—it seemed to him—could never be his, though Lina had re-embraced it; though she whispered to him, as they rose from their knees:

"Now I am truly happy, because I believe that all my sins have been forgiven".

Did they all believe that—all these skeletons who filed back, to their cellars, to their rifle pits, to the wrecks of their outbuildings, while the priest was escorted underground so that, over the wounded also, might be pronounced the Absolution?

Maybe. But could the mere difference of a creed separate him from them?

No. Nothing could separate him from them. He was of their fellowship. A human fellowship. A fellowship of comrades, all facing—and of their own free will—the same doom.

For, with the dusk, came the last parley in that dark wreck of an office, the last offer from Major Escarlata:

"At least, let the women and children go. I pledge you my word, I pledge you the priest's word, that no harm shall come to them".

"They can go if they so choose", said Colonel Moscardó; and he sent for three of the women, bidding them consult those below.

"Take your time", he told them. "Let this gentleman's offer be considered very carefully by all of you."

"But there was nothing to consider", Lina told Maurice when he came to her at nightfall. "We are all of one mind. If you die, we die with you."

The woman who shared the bed with Lina, said : "If need be, we will die fighting, like the women of Saragossa".

"*Vaya con dios*", said Doña Isabella as Maurice went back to his post.

§ 2

Later that night, the enemy tried to storm Maurice's post. Creeping across the terrace they reached the very foot of the wrecked north wall, heaving bombs at the rifle pits there ; and, because a new searchlight almost blinded one as one crouched under the head cover, one wasted many cartridges before that attack had failed.

And after that attack had failed one heard voices shrieking from behind the lights, "Come on out. We're ready for you".

But again, with the voices silent, one heard the drills going and the faint explosions in the mine. And all next day, one's imagination still visualised the men at work in the mine ; for all that day one laboured underground, helping to move the women and the children, their beds and their bedding, to a deeper cellar, to the huge vault of the cadets' swimming bath. And, as one laboured, one would have retched if one's stomach had not been so empty : so foul was the air with the stink of putrefying mud and the stench of the dung dropped by the mules and the horses.

And how many of the mules, how many of the horses, were still left to eat ?

The graybeard who butchered them told Maurice, resting for a moment while the shells splintered on the paving stones above, that there might be twenty, "And a few more in the stables of the main outbuilding".

"But we shall not live to finish them", cackled the graybeard, wiping his bloody hands on his leather apron.

And, that night again, a man blew out his own brains with his own rifle ; and he was the last to be buried in the burnt-out riding school. They buried their dead in the swimming bath after that, a little apart from the beds of the women, where once the young cadets, running down from the parade ground, took their shower baths.

The best part of two months now, since there had been one drop of water for those shower baths. And always the three remaining walls crumbled under the shell-fire; always the drills bit closer, closer and closer to the waggon gate and the foot of the south west tower.

Till at last—six mortal days and six mortal nights after the priest without the robes had come among them—the drills were silent. And that night, with no guns firing, Maurice Carteret knelt—not for courtesy's sake—to his own God.

§ 3

Maurice knelt alone, in the dark wrecked chapel from which the men of another creed had removed the figure of the Virgin and the altar and the sacred vessels, hoping against hope that these, at least, might be saved from the mines.

He knelt to pray; but for a long while his lips would not open, neither would any prayer formulate itself in his brain.

There were only pictures in his brain, great pictures that he might have painted had he not preferred selfindulgence, some easy woman, some easily acquired money.

Presently, however, those pictures passed; and he looked on others, mostly of his childhood, when he had been happy, being without sin.

For with childhood over—it seemed—his life had been all sin, not so much because of the easy women or the easy money, but because—having been given a talent—he had buried it.

And with that—or so it seemed—he saw his last picture, the image of God his imagination had first made for him. Such a crude, such a childish image—of an old man with piercing eyes and lips hidden by a great beard, clad in a long brown robe rather like “the pater’s dressing gown” and belted about the waist with a cord.

Yet somehow he still chose this image, rather than the wax figure of a woman in the soiled white satin with the jewels hung round her neck, which his comrades had carried down to the cellars.

And to this image—at long last—he found himself praying, not for safety but for courage, not for himself but for others,

for this corporate body of which he had been made member ; that some of his fellow soldiers, at least, might not perish, and the fort be held.

Because so long as this battered fort were held—or thus at least it seemed to Maurice—no man of the fellowship need fear death, and no woman either. Least of all Lina and himself.

Nevertheless, though this prayer—being the prayer of every true soldier—seemed to have cast out the last vestige of fear, he was still afraid for Lina ; and, rising from his knees, he went in search of her, by the catacomb road.

§ 4

There was movement, there were mule dips gleaming, all along the catacomb road. For, once again, they were shifting some of the women's quarters, to a great vault far below the north terrace, to yet deeper cellars under the parade ground.

But Lina's quarters—one told Maurice—had not been shifted, though that stone staircase down which the young cadets once ran laughing to their shower baths had caved in to the afternoon's bombardment ; and bodies lay there.

He heard men trying to tear the fallen stones off those bodies as he staggered into the stench and the darkness of the swimming bath ; and found Lina also on her knees ; and stood by for a long while, not daring to lay a hand on her.

"*Mañana*", she said when she rose from her knees. "Tomorrow, they will make an end of us. I have brought you to your death, Maurice. Say that you forgive me for it." Later—after he had reasoned with Lina, telling her, almost brusquely, "There are only the two mines. They're right away on the other side of the courtyard. And the whole of this place is built on rock, so they can't do as much damage as all that"—Doña Isabella whispered, "*Mañana. Debe ser mañana. No se entiende nada de las minas*".

Yet again next morning the big guns hammered and hammered at that new breach in the east wall, through which the library had already collapsed, pouring a cascade of mangled books on to the wrecked lorries and the shell-scythed acacia trees of the trenched parade ground.

And again that afternoon the warning whistles blew—for men still watched from the two remaining cupolas; again, that night, those on duty behind the ten-foot walls of that vast room below the south west tower heard the hiss of the compressors, so that, for an hour or so, the men and the women and the children of the Alcazar cherished a last mite of hope that rescue might come before the mines were blown.

But long before dawn of the eighteenth of September, their only hope was in God.

CHAPTER NINETY-TWO

§ 1

ALL that night, Lina and the woman with her spent in prayer. But all that night the men of the Alcazar spent in unceasing labour; strengthening their barricades, deepening their trenches, fortifying their loopholes; hauling the few scaling ladders and the scant supply of bombs from the basement storerooms, oiling and cleaning their few machine guns; while their officers went among them, giving this order or that order, till every man of the citadel garrison knew his point of assembly.

Sleepless and hungry—in the uncanny hush of that hour before sunrise—every man of the citadel garrison took cover at his point of assembly. And, because the fear of God was on nearly all of them, they scarcely spoke to one another. Nor would any man let his mind stray to that vaulted room below the south west tower.

For there were still those who listened in that vaulted room under the mined tower; and what their fate would be, one could imagine—even if a kinder were one's own.

A bullet—Maurice hoped—would be his own; and, hugging that hope, he wondered what his mother, what John and Philip would think of him, if chance ever delivered that letter which he had scribbled a few hours ago, and given to Lina, "Because you're sure to get out all right sooner or later".

Lina didn't believe that was true; but somehow he knew it, just as he knew that he would never see his mother, or John, or Philip, again.

And one other thing Maurice knew, very clearly and very strangely as he crouched behind those huge stones which now barricaded the whole of the east cloister: that this would be for the best.

§ 2

Light grew, gray above the decapitated north east tower, while Maurice was still wrestling with this strange knowledge, trying to persuade himself that his death would not be for the best ; that, if he could but escape with his life, he might still become a great artist ; and that, even if all such hopes were falsified, he could still be a good husband to Lina.

Yet the strange knowledge persisted ; and as, with the coming of the light, there broke from all round the Alcazar an incessant rattle of musketry, a ceaseless crackling of machine gun fire, all his capacity for selfdelusion seemed to be stripped away, showing him that he had never loved the real Lina, but only the sensuous husk.

It was to save that husk—and to save it for his own gratification—that he had taken her to the high mountains. Everything he had ever done for Lina, had been done for the sake of the body. Not one thing for the soul.

And thinking thus—while the stray bullets ricocheted here and there about the courtyard—he too felt the last and the greatest of all fears, even that fear of God which still kept the comrades either side of him silent, shaking every nerve in his wasted body ; until all the peculiar joy and all the peculiar peace these last days and these last nights had won for him seemed gone.

Peace and joy, hope and love and courage and comfort—all of these were now gone. The deity fashioned by his poor finite mind—that crude, childish image of the old man with the great beard clad in the long brown robe—had deserted him.

That deity was only another selfdelusion. In all life, on all earth, only one thing had not proved selfdelusion—this fellowship of brave men and braver women.

“For their sake”, he thought ; and because, once again, the thought was utterly selfless, he felt peace creeping back, and joy creeping back, hope and love and courage and comfort creeping back, very slowly, into the depths of his soul.

Nevertheless, there was still much of terror in his soul, and much of envy for these comrades who had received absolution according to their creed.

"If only I had a creed", he caught himself wishing; and once more, as the whistles blew, as they crouched closer in cover to the whine of those first shells, he felt his whole body quiver.

Yet the fort—he knew—must be held.

§ 3

The fort—if the mines left one brick standing on another, or one soul alive who could still fire a rifle—had to be held. That, at least, seemed clear to Maurice Carteret; and gradually—because there are worse creeds than this same clarity which is every true soldier's—his nerves steadied, bringing both mind and body under control.

These comrades crouched either side of him had found their tongues. He knew that he was talking with them, speculating why this hurricane of shellfire should be deluging the still-solid masonry behind them.

"It is to drive us on to the mines", said one comrade; and the other, "Lucky we know where they are. He did good work, that engineer officer of ours."

Maurice asked, "Do you think the women will stay underground?"

"There are guards at each cellar door, *amigo*. He thinks of everything, our commander."

Talk ceased. Maurice looked at his watch, still going though the glass was splintered. Twenty-five past six already. They must have been under bombardment the best part of half an hour. And what a bombardment. Every enemy gun must be at gunfire. But the rifles and the machine guns had stopped . . .

"Not long now", he thought. But another five minutes ticked across the watch face; and still the shells crashed and thudded on the east wall.

In between the thudding crashes, he heard masonry falling. Every now and again, fragments of tilework or brickwork, slithering from the roof above, pattered down on to the paving stones of the courtyard.

"You see—I was right", muttered the comrade who had

first spoken. "They are concentrating their fire on the one wall. It can only be for the one purpose."

"They must think us fools", muttered the other.

An officer emerged from the cellars.

"After the mines go up", he shouted, "do not move until you hear my whistle. Then—every man to his place."

One of the men with Maurice crossed himself. Five more minutes—seven more minutes—ticked across the watch face. He thought, "It's funny. I'm not afraid any more. Only curious". He lifted his head. If he shifted a little, he would be able to squint between these stones.

His body moved on its elbows. He could see clear across the courtyard now. The sight fascinated him. For long seconds his eye was only the artist's. Imaginatively, he painted the whole picture—the armoured statue, the ruins of the great stairway in the foreground; behind these, on the left edge of his imaginary canvas, that four-square tower, a hundred feet from base to vane, its cupola already sunlit, silver-gold against clear sky.

Greco's ashen white for that sky; his gray-greens for the tower and the top of the massive façade that ran out from it. Black shadows, with here and there a splash of subdued crimson, round and about the barred waggon gate.

Or should the gate be unbarred. Should the priest be just emerging through it? Should this courtyard be full of figures—one saluting, the rest on their knees.

Blast it, why were they shaking again—his own knees? Why hadn't the whistles blown? The whistles always blew when shelling stopped. And it had stopped. They could come out from cover now. They could walk about. They...

Were his knees shaking? Or had the stones twitched? Was the tower, was the very wall twitching?

Then, from a mouth at the base of the tower, from a mouth in the paving stones under the gate, two orange tongues burst; and huge waves of solid air.

Dimly he felt those huge waves of solid air slapping like giant hands at his ear drums. Simultaneously he saw the tower levitated.

The tower had been levitated intact. It soared skyward.

An enormous hunk of wall—that also intact—was soaring skyward. Ten thousand guns were belching, a million flames were roaring.

Dark now.

The death dark ?

No.

One had been left alive . . .

CHAPTER NINETY-THREE

§ 1

. . . It was still in pitch darkness that Maurice realised the explosions had left him alive.

For what seemed an eternity noise continued to deafen him. All other thoughts, all other sensations, had stopped. He could not even remember his last order. Only instinct kept him to cover.

Then, abruptly, thought came back. Suddenly, he understood that both mines had gone up ; that this darkness was a dust darkness, this noise the noise of stones falling. But after what seemed another century no more stones fell, and the darkness thinned, and he heard a whistle, followed by a known voice—his officer's—shouting, "Quickly. To the north breach".

Staggering upright, stumbling for his old rifle pit in the north breach, he was just aware of other men, some with scaling ladders, some with bomb boxes, some with machine guns, making for those new breaches—the smoking hole where the south west tower had stood, the gap where the centre of the west wall had subsided, so that one saw a great wedge of dust-moted sky there.

But one's own place was in one's own pit.

Breathing hard, his ears still aching from the slaps of those giant hands, he clambered the known way up the rubble. Breathless, he made the crest of the rubble, dropped to his knees, hauled himself over, slithered to cover behind his ammunition boxes, clicked off the safety catch of his rifle.

Right of him, he saw his two comrades clambering down. Above and to his left—he knew—others would soon be manning the windows of the wrecked galleries.

"Must have beaten them all to it", he thought; and a fierce

exaltation gripped him by the throat. At least, he was alive, unhurt, still able to defend himself, if need be with this bayonet.

But one shot better without the bayonet. No need to fix it yet awhile. He loosened the steel in its scabbard; thought of laying it beside him; decided not to; looked down.

A few more stones seemed to have fallen. That shell hole was a new one. Otherwise, however, nothing to his immediate front had altered. The red flag still flew from the roof of the convent. That lamppost still leaned drunkenly across that burnt-out lorry. Those two eucalyptus trees—the only ones standing—still marked the edge of the walled terrace, below which ran the road.

Suddenly he heard shouts from the road; saw a man's head above the wall. The head disappeared before he could shoot at it. But almost immediately, from the galleries above him, rapid fire ripped. Then a machine gun chattered there; and he realised that the enemy must have swarmed over the left edge of the terrace.

Blood oozing from a great wound across his forehead, another man slithered down into the pit.

"Couldn't find my way", he gasped. "Are they coming?" And even while he still spoke, the wall below seemed to be a wall of men's heads.

Then the heads had bodies, and the bodies were running, and Maurice had emptied his magazine at them, and they had checked, at the very foot of the rubble, they were firing back at him, wildly.

He heard the second of their own machine guns crackle while he slapped a new clip into his rifle; saw one of the attackers clap his hand to his stomach, another topple forwards. A third he himself shot, straight between the eyes, at less than forty paces; and with that shot everything went red before his own eyes so that there was only one instinct left in him—to kill . . .

§ 2

. . . Momentarily, Maurice had ceased to kill. But the red haze still hid everything but that immediate body sprawled on

its face within five paces of the pit ; and, even when his sight cleared, it took appreciable seconds before he realised that they must have beaten off the first attack.

Below him, now, was no sign of any attack, only a few other bodies, some writhing, some quiet. He turned to the man beside him ; saw, to his amazement, that he also was of the dead.

"When did that happen ?" he thought ; and looked to his rifle. It was empty. He re-charged it. More fire ripped from the galleries. Something like a cricket ball sailed up ; sailed over ; dropped and burst in the courtyard behind him. He realised that there were still enemies hidden below ; that they were throwing bombs.

"Cowards", he thought. "Why don't they come on ? Why don't they charge us ?"

Then another crowd of enemies swarmed the wall ; and he was busy again. Easy shooting, this. The fools kept checking. Both machine guns were going again by then. Enfilading the devils ! They were devils. They murdered priests. They'd murder Lina if ever they got through and down into the courtyard. But they weren't coming through. Not if he knew it. Not while he could handle this rifle.

Too hot to hold, this rifle. He grabbed for the dead man's ; shot and shot till the second rush stayed, swayed, scattered.

But after that came a third rush, and a fourth, and always more bombs bursting, and first one of their own machine guns, then the other, silenced. If only he had a machine gun. That patch of terrace round the lamppost was alive with enemies, simply alive with them.

The red haze rose again. Through it he saw a man clambering up at him. The man rose to his feet. His hand lifted. He toppled over backwards. The bomb he had been about to throw burst. Maurice heard his own voice shouting, "Take that, you bastard".

Then another voice, louder than his own, bellowed, "Cease fire. Cease fire everybody". And suddenly, from behind him, up out of the courtyard, up and over the crest on which he lay shooting, swept a long line of men in the black tricorues.

The sheer drag of that line, as it swept by, lifted Maurice

to his feet, caught him as in the bight of a rope. These men of the Civic Guard had fixed bayonets. He jerked his own from its scabbard, snapped the ring-catch home. The red haze was gone now. He saw clearly. He understood that he must keep in this line, level with these men, who had checked for it to wheel.

Almost shoulder to shoulder the line wheeled. Almost shoulder to shoulder, they stumbled down the wrecked masonry. Shoulder to shoulder—bayonets at the ready—they charged along the terrace at the mob.

There was no weight, there was no pace—only discipline—behind that charge. Yet because of that discipline, because these starving men of the Guard whose wasted legs could not even carry them at the double, came on so steadily, the mob wavered, and a cry of sheer affright broke from it, and here a knot of men turned tail. And now, just for the split of a second, the line halted, and the bayoneted rifles were levelled for the volley.

And after that one volley, the Reds ran before the cold steel.

Blood dripped from Maurice's steel as he halted, panting, at the far edge of the terrace ; but there were still five cartridges in his magazine, and these he loosed off as fast as finger could squeeze trigger at the men scrambling to safety from the wall.

Exaltation was on him again. For the moment the spell of discipline had been broken. He re-loaded ; loosed off seven more shots at those figures disappearing towards the Zoco-dover ; turned ; saw the boy running at him ; saw the boy's eyes ; read murder in those eyes ; swung the butt crashing to the head.

More blood spurted from that smashed head. He was all blood as he fought his return way, stabbing and shooting, to the foot of the rubble. And there discipline caught him again as the line faced about.

But there were no more enemies to face, only this raffle of dead and dying, this useless litter of unexploded bombs and rifles and petrol tins and ammunition boxes. Nor did any fire a shot at the guardsmen as they climbed back, toting their wounded, trailing that huge red flag they had captured, by the way they had come.

§ 3

To Maurice, swept back and up over the crest, as he had been swept forward and down, by the sheer pull of the line, it seemed that the north breach was now safe. His mind went to the other breaches, there across this courtyard, where the rifles still spat, where the machine guns still chattered, and the bombs were still bursting.

But at those breaches, also, the enemy was giving back ; and after a while one heard only sporadic shots, as one closed one's eyes, as one rested one's aching back against this fragment of a pillar . . . till abruptly one felt the hand tugging at one's shoulder and the voice at one's ear.

"*Ayuda !*" shouted that voice. "*Ayuda*".

Maurice looked up to see a man bending over him, and two more hauling yet another box of bombs from the cellars.

It took all four of them—so weak they were—to drag that steel box up the slipping rubble and along the crest to the galleries. And even before they reached the shelter of the galleries, they heard the crash of fire from the main outbuilding, and a noise as of a house falling, and the excited screams of their enemies, and the roar of the tank's engines as it burst its way past the main outbuilding, as it crushed its way up round the hairpin bend in the roadway that led up to north terrace.

And now, unslinging his rifle, Maurice could actually see the tank, nosing its way along that wall where he had stood to fire at his retreating enemies ; see it turning on its tractors, and its guns swinging. Then, very slowly—pitching from shell hole to shell hole, flattening tree trunks, flattening great chunks of fallen brickwork, flattening all that raffle of dead and dying, all that litter of abandoned accoutrements—it moved for the breach. And behind it, moved men.

Once, twice and again—its guns vomiting shell at the emptied rifle pits along the crest line—the tank laboured, roaring, to climb the breach. Almost, with their bombs bursting useless against its armour, but their rifles mowing down all who tried to follow, it won to the top of the breach. Until towards the end—slowly, ever so slowly—it began to

slither backward from the crest of the breach ; and the last who had followed was shot down ; and never another man dared swarm the wall of the terrace.

But for a short while yet the tank, its guns empty, still nosed its way up and down, trumpeting defiance from its klaxons ; and no man threw a bomb at it, no man loosed a rifle at it—hardly when, at long last, it roared away, could they raise that one derisive cheer for it—so weary were they of this fight which had already lasted from dawn till well past midday.

Yet, an hour after midday, the guns started hammering them again, driving all but the sentries below ground.

CHAPTER NINETY-FOUR

§ I

ONE felt safe—thought Maurice—here under ground, here in this darkened cellar, listening to this rumour or that rumour as it passed from mouth to mouth.

“Only seven of them”, said one mouth. “Yes. They held the Arms Museum. It was cracked clean open. You could have driven a lorry through the wall. But the Reds couldn’t get through.”

And another mouth said, “They attacked across the Coralillo. But they couldn’t get through that way either”.

And a third, “The tower fell right across the street. It must have killed a lot of them. Anyway, they couldn’t climb over it”.

And a fourth, “I went down to see my woman just now. They had no casualties. We have only lost two women since the siege began. And they only died of old age”.

But he, Maurice Carteret, would not die of old age. He still knew that. Definitely. Only he didn’t care.

Curious, that he should not care; that nothing seemed to matter any more—even Lina. When he was gone, John and his mother would look after Lina. He had asked them to do that in his letter—and they wouldn’t let him down.

John and his mother never let anyone down. They weren’t like himself—unreliable, always changing their minds.

He hadn’t been so unreliable this time, though. He’d done his best to hold the fort. And he would go on doing his best. Something to be proud of anyway. He’d like John, he’d like his mother to know about it . . .

The fourth mouth spoke again.

“Our *Ingles*”, it said, “is asleep.”

§ 2

Stark hunger woke Maurice from that sleep. Their rations had been brought. He gobbled the foul food greedily. He was thirsty, too—and when the sergeant doled out the water he emptied his glass at one gulp.

“Plenty of work tonight”, said the sergeant—and in a few moments, with only an occasional shell thudding, they filed after him, up the steps into the smashed cloisters.

Dusk was just falling. Gunfire had ceased. An aeroplane scudded high over the courtyard. The cold breeze of the sierras set them shivering as they waited for their officer. Even seen in this half-light, the damage the mines had wrought appalled them.

“It looks like a builder’s yard”, said one mouth; and another, “Or as though there had been an earthquake”.

Then their officer came and spoke with them; and Maurice understood that there was no longer any way out of this place, unless they made it with their hands.

His comrades grumbled a little when they heard that, when they were led back to the cellars, and along the catacomb road and up the dark stairs to where two other officers stood holding mule-fat dips, while men wrestled with crowbars and pickaxes to heave away the debris. But the sergeant checked them with a few words.

“The outbuildings”, he said. “They’re all cut off. Their garrisons have had no food since last night.”

“If any of them are left alive”, said the man next to Maurice.

They set to work. Every now and again it seemed to Maurice that he heard rifle fire from the barracks, from the house of the Capucines.

But it was not until an hour later that they all heard the field gun, and that big explosion from the main outbuilding. And after that they worked feverishly, hauling at the stones.

They were enormous, they were dangerous, the stones. As one wrenched to loosen these, those tottered, threatening to crush legs, arms, fingers. Men shouted to one another, “*Cuidado. Cuidado!*” But, for all their care, one had his leg broken; and that meant two to carry the stretcher, humping it

as best they might through the tunnel they were making and down the stairs.

Yet already the factor in this tunnel seemed to be lessening ; and presently the mule-fat dip in the sergeant's hand flickered to the faintest waft of fresher air.

"*Coraje*", he called. "*Coraje*. We'll soon be through."

And by midnight—after five hours of incessant labour—they were at the last stones, hauling them inwards, heaving them outwards, hardly knowing what they did because of this frightful weariness that was on them.

"Shovels", called the sergeant then ; and so they shovelled away the last of the fallen brickwork ; so Maurice Carteret staggered up and out of the citadel to hear the rifles still at work in the main outbuilding, to see the glow of searchlights flickering, there beyond the smashed lorries and the shell-scythed acacias, on the great north breach.

§ 3

Maurice was so dog-weary by then that it took several minutes before he realised that they must have dug their way through the wreck of the curved passage. An officer had followed them out, and men carrying tins of rations and water bottles, men toting ammunition boxes.

Enemy bullets were zipping over, mushrooming against the tower behind them. But that Maurice did not realise at all.

He wanted a drink of water. Beyond anything else on earth he wanted to snatch at one of those wicker-covered bottles, to tear the cork out of it, to drain it at a gulp.

But the men carrying the ration tins and the water bottles were already disappearing in the darkness ; and presently six more officers crawled out of the tunnel they had made ; presently he heard one of them whispering to another, "There are not enough of us. We shall have to take some men for the horses. What say you ? Shall we ask for volunteers ?"

Immediately he heard himself whispering, "Take me. I'm rather useful with horses. Where are they ?"

"*Establo dos*", answered the officer. "*Vamonos*."

He led the way. Maurice and the other volunteers followed

him, into a shell hole, out of it, round what had once been the wall of the esplanade, past the gutted riding school, down what had once been a road.

More shells had holed that sloping road; but midway of it every man except Maurice stopped to cross himself, for that part of the wall and those two little towers were still standing, and not a bullet, not a shell splinter had scarred the plaque of the Virgin between.

"*Milagro*", Maurice heard the man in front of him mutter as he glanced up.

The rescuers stumbled on, into pitch darkness. Above them, now, loomed the rear wall of the main outbuilding. A great hole gaped in that wall. Behind it, crouched one of those who had carried the rations.

"They're still alive", he said. "But Stable Four's been blown in. The Reds brought up a gun. The horses are this way."

Half the party went on.

The ration carrier led the rest across a 'shadowy patio, under an arch. Someone lit a match. Maurice saw horses' quarters, mules' quarters. Someone said, "Get them away. Take two each. Take them to the swimming bath entrance. That's open".

Muffled as though they came from some underground shooting gallery, Maurice heard intermittent rifle shots. Through a grating at floor level, glimmered a barred square of blue light. His nostrils gave him the known reek of burning petrol. As he edged his way into its stall, the first horse reared, wrenching sideways at the headrope.

He heard himself coaxing, "Steady, Rapsallion", as he undid the rope.

The other horse kicked at him. Fumbling at the knot of that rope, he said, "Steady, Flyaway"; and laughed to himself, stupidly, because it was so absurd to call these two horses by those names.

Then, flashingly, he remembered the horses which had answered to those two names—and Nan.

The flash of memory sparked out of mind. A puff of foul smoke blew through the grating. Both horses plunged, nearly

wrenching his arms from their sockets, staggering him on his feet. Somehow he hauled them through the arch, into the patio. One of them lashed out with its rear hoofs. The other tried to cow-kick. Yanking viciously at both ropes, he heard an officer shout, "Don't wait for the others". Far overhead, a shell whistled; burst out of sight.

With almost the last of his strength, he mastered the horses; led them towards the hole in the rear wall. They stepped over the fallen bricks gingerly. He could feel how frightened they were as he shortened his grip on the ropes. He found himself talking to them again, calling them by those same silly names.

"Come along, Flyaway. Come along, Rapscaillon. We'll soon be out of this."

They seemed to understand. They nuzzled at his shoulders. They didn't know—poor devils—that he was only saving them to eat them. He led them round the angle of the wall; felt hard paving under the worn soles of his shoes. It was just a mite lighter here. One could make out the road.

He began to climb the road, stumbled, recovered himself. The horses seemed to know their way better than he did. They were pulling at him now. He felt glad of the pull. He couldn't have got up this bit of the road without it. How far were they? Halfway. Right under the plaque of the Virgin.

"*Milagro*", he caught himself thinking. "Perhaps it is a miracle. Ought to have been shot to bits long ago."

And on that—clumsily, lengthening his grip on the right-hand rope—he crossed himself; and looked up.

The porcelain face, indistinct above, seemed as though it were smiling. Weariness seemed to leave him. He shortened the rope again, wondering why the horses had stood so still.

"Come along, you two", he heard himself say. "Another hundred yards, and we'll all be under cover."

He pulled now. They obeyed, following him up round the wrecked buttress of the road, letting him guide them across the shell holes of the parade ground.

It was considerably lighter here. Vague starshine revealed the huge bulk of the south east tower, not yet down. He had

only to make his way along this façade to reach the entrance to the swimming bath.

There was the other tower, the one he had seen decapitated. Only a few yards to go now. Perhaps they wouldn't need to eat these horses after all. Relief couldn't be very far away. Funny, if he escaped with his life. He might, easily. The good times he would have, the cool drinks he would have, the marvellous meals he would have . . . if . . . when . . .

§ 4

The officer on duty inside the swimming bath entrance, he also dog weary, had just heard shoe soles and horses' hoofs picking their way over loose bricks ; was just aware of someone calling, "Is anybody there? Is the way clear? Can I bring them in?"

Then he heard the shell-hiss change to a scream ; saw the blue flash of its bursting.

"*Esta el Ingles*", he announced a few minutes later.

"Is he dead?" asked one of the two skeletons who had run out to hold the wounded horses.

"*Puede ser.*"

"These two animals can walk, *señor capitano.*"

"Take them in then—and send out a stretcher. Anyway, we shall have to bury him."

But six more immortal days and six more immortal nights were to go by before they could bury Maurice Carteret—and for him, every hour of all those days, of all those nights, went by in darkness, in utter silence.

Other men in that travesty of a hospital saw his agony. He could neither hear nor see theirs.

CHAPTER NINETY-FIVE

§ 1

THE second day after Maurice had been wounded, one of the two doctors—fearing gangrene—took off his right arm at the shoulder. The operation hardly hurt him at all. He could not imagine why he was being held so tightly. After it was over, he could still feel himself clenching the fingers of his right hand.

"I'll be painting again soon", he muttered next day. "I should like to see my wife."

Lina tried to say, "I'm here". But that was useless. She could only touch him; and it was not until the fourth night that he recognised her touch. Even then, he could not be sure.

"If that's Lina", he muttered—and she had to bend very close to the flaxen-bearded face with the dirty bandage across its eyes before she could make out what he was saying,—
"make some sign."

She traced the sign of the cross on his right cheek. He groaned to himself for a full minute.

"I did that", he said suddenly. "But it didn't do any good. I don't think I started believing soon enough. Pity. But you'll be all right, darling."

Speech dribbled away.

Lina stayed on for an hour, though the hospital orderly was so angry with her.

"You women have no right in here", he scowled.

"But he's dying."

"Pray he does. That leg will have to come off at the knee in the morning."

They strapped Maurice on a table for the leg operation. He knew what they were doing to him that time. They had to

put a gag in his mouth until he fainted. As the two orderlies carried him back to his blood-soaked mattress, one doctor said to the other, "Why don't you give him up? He's stone blind; and he's stone deaf".

"I can't be sure about that", said the other doctor. "Neither can you. Perhaps the nerves are only temporarily paralysed."

That night, he could not even speak; and the orderly only allowed Lina to stay ten minutes. All next day, he lay comatose, hardly even groaning. She knew that it was wicked to pray for his death, yet could not help doing so.

Evening found all the other women very excited. The Alcazar was as good as relieved. The Reds were withdrawing some of their guns. This proved that Radio Club Portugal had been right when it announced a great victory on the line of the Guadarrama.

On her way to the hospital cellar, Lina was stopped by a young officer she knew. He seemed strangely moved. He lifted her hand to his lips.

"I come from the tower", he said. "They have actually seen them. Only two miles away. They will be here tomorrow."

"*Mañana?*"

"*Si, señora. Mañana.* I am ordered to get my gun up—and my two dozen shells. *Mañana! Vaya con dios, señora.*"

The hospital orderly had heard the news too. He let her come in. He even lit an extra dip for her, and stuck it in the brickwork.

"No pain all day", he said. "See, he looks happier. He is breathing more easily."

The boy on the next mattress said, "I have no woman. Talk to me till he wakes. Is it true that Franco will be here tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"God has been very good to us, *señora.*"

But would He be good to Maurice? Would He let Maurice die?

§ 2

Lina was still watching Maurice. He still lay comatose. The young soldier talked on. Presently he fell asleep. Some

of the other wounded were moaning. The orderly came round again.

"No shells tonight", he said. "Tomorrow—perhaps—no rifle fire. Aren't you tired of standing, *señora*?"

He fetched her a chair. She sat down; continued her vigil. Memories haunted her. Imagination suggested, "If Maurice does not die, you will have to take care of him always". Conscience asked, "Will you be strong enough? Won't you be tempted again? Are you really cured? Are you quite sure of yourself?"

She answered conscience, "Yes. I am quite sure".

All the same, if God were kind, he would take Maurice. Telling her beads, she prayed once more, "Take him. Don't be angry with me for asking that. I know him so well. I know how miserable he would be—a cripple without eyes".

One of the doctors came round. She asked him the time. He said, "Past midnight". She asked him, "May I stay?" He said, "Yes".

Time stopped. She realised, with a little shock, that the mule-fat dip was guttering down to the brickwork. She watched it go out. She closed her eyes—not to sleep but in order that she might see the old Maurice, so gay, so handsome. As she opened them, she heard her name called:

"Lina. Are you there, Lina?"

Before she could think, she had answered, in English, "Yes, I'm here, Maurice darling".

He said, "I can't see you. What's happened to me?"

Again without thought she asked:

"You can hear then?"

"Yes. Why shouldn't I? Have I been wounded or something?"

"Yes."

"When? I seem to have been here a long time. I can't remember much. Did they take my legs off?"

"Only one of them."

The news seemed to distress him. In the semi-darkness she had the impression that he bit his lips.

"How far up?" he asked.

She told him.

"Like John", he said. "Funny."

She took his one hand. A long silence followed. He seemed to have fallen asleep. Right at the other end of the cellar, she was aware of a gray pinpoint in the brickwork.

"Dawn", she thought. And suddenly rifles and machine guns were firing again; suddenly a frightful crash almost toppled her from her chair.

Maurice woke.

"What was that?" he asked. "Another mine?"

Wisps of black smoke, acrid fumes, filled the cellar. Dimly, she could hear boots clattering, men shouting above. The rifles were going like mad now. The boy in the next bed screamed, "They're attacking. They'll get in. They'll butcher us".

Maurice said in Spanish, "Courage. They'll never get in"; then, "Don't be afraid, Lina".

She said, "I am not afraid"; and took his one hand again.

Above them, the last mine had exploded, the last fight of all was raging.

"Let me up", said Maurice suddenly. "I can hobble there. I can still shoot. I could see all right if only you'd take this bandage off. Take it off."

Believing him, she obeyed. He tried to haul himself upright; fell back on the blood-caked pillow.

"It's no good", he muttered. "I can't see a thing. But they don't need my help. They'll hold the fort without me. Don't be afraid, Lina."

She repeated, "I am not afraid".

"That's all right then."

He began to pant.

"Mumsey", he panted. "Mumsey. It's all in my letter. Take care of her. You and John, take care of her."

And again: "The letter. They'll take care of you if you only give them my letter".

The panting quickened; ceased. She bent to him. There was still breath in his nostrils; the lashes of his sightless eyes still twitched. All the same, she knew that God had heard her, that He would answer her prayers . . .

§ 3

Maurice Carteret died at noon without recovering consciousness. The last attack had been beaten off by then. From the ruins of The Alcazar, the red and yellow flag flew again, as heliograph of the besieged winked to heliograph of their rescuers. Presently, through the breach in the outer wall of the cavalry library, poked the muzzle of a mountain gun. The gun began to bark away its shells.

Lina counted those barks. There were exactly two dozen of them. Then she tried to count up how many days, how many nights, she had spent in these cellars.

The doctor who had just closed Maurice's eyes said, answering the boy on the next mattress, "We came in on the eighteenth of July. Today is the twenty-seventh of September".

But it was not until one Saturday afternoon in October that Lina's letter enclosing Maurice's reached the Manor.

"He was always so good to me", she ended that letter. "He was such a hero. Please be proud of him, and please forgive me for having married him."

John, looking over his mother's shoulder as they read Maurice's scrawl for the second time, said :

"It's curious that his wife doesn't give any address. He asks us to look after her. How can we, if we don't even know where she is?"

"She says we're not to worry about her. She says that twice."

Charlotte spoke in her usual voice. This sudden news of Maurice's death seemed to have left her completely unmoved.

"I believe I'm more upset than she is", thought John.

Then he felt her shoulder shaking—ever so slightly—under his hand.

"If you don't mind, dear", she said, "I think I'll go up to my room for a little."

She rejoined him at dinner—holding her steel-gray head high. All that winter, she hunted her hardest. He could perceive no change in her.

He used to think, "It's marvellous how young she keeps.

It's wonderful what pals we are; how we tell each other everything".

He used to think, "Poor old Maurice. He was really a good fellow at heart. It's rather rotten how little difference his death has made to us, how little we miss him, how seldom we talk about him".

But every now and again their talk would turn to the woman Maurice had married. They really ought to try to find her. They really ought to do something for her. After all, she was one of the family.

During one such talk—with hunting over and the first daffodils unsheathing and Johnny due home next week—John Carteret did wonder whether, by any chance, his mother had taken Maurice's death more to heart than she would admit.

She seemed a little sad that afternoon; and, when they came back from their usual walk up to the Fort, it struck him that she looked her full sixty.

It struck John as a little strange, too, that she should refuse to come up to London for the coronation, although, as a member of Parliament, he had been allotted two good seats in the Abbey.

"I would rather spend it with our own people", she told him.

"Still the complete feudalism", he chaffed; and never knew how much that one word "feudalist" hurt her—with its memories of Rupert, and of Rupert's son . . .

CHAPTER NINETY-SIX

§ 1

It was more than two months since the coronation, nine since they had received Lina's letter, on that July morning when the telephone by John's bed rang and he heard his son's high, excited voice.

"Gratters", began Johnny. "I've just seen it in the papers. You might have told a chap. You'll be in the cabinet pretty soon, I expect. Are you and granny coming down as you promised or does this mean you'll be too busy?"

"No. We'll be there all right. Thanks for ringing up, old chap. It's only a very minor post—nothing like a cabinet ministership."

"It's a jolly good beginning, though. I say, wouldn't it be fun if you ended up by being made Premier?"

"Now you're talking absolute nonsense."

"I don't see why. I bet you'd make a jolly good one. You'd soon put those twirts Musso and Hitler in their places". And after a few more chaffing sentences the complete young British democrat—age fifteen and a quarter—rang off.

John's daily woman brought him his morning tea. He drank it quickly; took his crutches from the bedrail, and went to his bath.

His son's enthusiasm had pleased him. Life generally seemed rather pleasing. Perhaps he would be in the cabinet before he'd finished. Anyway, he'd made a start. He was no longer a mere backbencher. And he'd settled affairs with Uncle Herbert. They were to sign the agreements this morning.

Not a bad chap, that young partner he'd found for Herbert. The sister was rather nice too. A pretty name, Margery.

Margery Melhuish. She must be about twenty-seven. A little

older perhaps. Rather on the serious side. Took quite an interest in politics. Seemed to get on very well with Johnny when they met at the match. How many times had one met her altogether? Not more than half a dozen. Funny, what a fancy one had taken to her. Pity, she hadn't been able to come down to Harrow this afternoon. One would have liked to introduce her to Charlotte.

§ 2

John was having his breakfast by the time he reached that point in his meditations ; and, looking up from his paper, which also carried a paragraph about his appointment, it struck him—for the first time since he had taken the place, shortly after Nan's death—that this flat wasn't any too comfortable.

"Bit on the small side", he thought. "Gets a bit lonely of an evening. Not that I'm home much."

The word "home" intrigued him. This place really wasn't a home. It was only a *pied-à-terre* with a slip of a spare bedroom for Johnny. One couldn't very well go on living here now that one had something of an official position. One might have to entertain a bit. Supposing one took a little house?

Difficult, that. For a start, he'd have to furnish. Charlotte would help there, of course. But she wouldn't help one to entertain. She hardly ever came up to town since Maurice was killed. To-day would be quite an exception.

The telephone rang. Answering it, he heard Margery Melhuish. She, too, had seen the news of his appointment.

"I'm so pleased", she said, and :

"My brother and I were just wondering if you care for polo. There are two very good matches at Hurlingham on Saturday. We've got a ticket to spare. Could you lunch with us first, or are you too busy?"

It was only after John had booked the appointment in his thin blue diary and replaced the receiver, that he began to wonder how many Saturday afternoons he had spent in London during the last eleven years.

"Not half a dozen all told", he remembered. "The last one was when we were waiting for news of the abdication."

It struck him that Charlotte might think him a little remiss. It crossed his mind that it would be easy enough to ring Margery Melhuish back and explain that he always spent his week ends with his mother. After all, he didn't really care for polo.

Nine o'clock, however, found him, as usual, bussing it to the office.

"*You* won't miss this place, my boy", said Herbert, after they had signed their agreements. "I know you think I'm a bit of an old ass not to retire. But I like making money, and I'm a creature of habits."

John thought, "So am I. But if I'm going to get out of one habit, being at this office every day, I don't see why I shouldn't get out of another. There's no need for me to spend every Saturday and Sunday at the Manor".

Formal business concluded, Herbert insisted on discussing "the situation".

"Now that you're more or less in the government", he said, "I hope to goodness you won't weaken about armaments. I seem to remember you were a bit of a pacifist in your time, as well as a bit of a socialist."

"I'm still an obstinate pacifist." John laughed. "And I don't believe in privilege any more than I used to. But these last two years have shown me it's no good living too much in the clouds. Abyssinia was a near thing. And Spain looks like being a nearer."

"You don't think this new non-intervention plan is going to work, I gather."

John hedged. It was Herbert's turn to laugh :

"The official manner already, eh. Well, I must be getting back to work. By the way, I've made you my heir—after Louisa's gone of course. There won't be much if you fellows keep on putting up the taxes. Not more than a hundred thousand I should say. Still, the interest'll come in useful—especially when you're out of office".

John stared. Words failed him. For a moment he reverted to the schoolboy.

"That's frightfully decent of you, uncle", he said at last.

"Oh, I dunno. Who else could I leave it to? Philip and

Elizabeth have got plenty. There are a few legacies to charity, of course."

"Well, I hope I shan't come into it for a long time."

"Not if I can help it, my boy." And the man whose hobby had been moneymaking laughed once more before he concluded :

"There's nothing to look so surprised about. You didn't imagine I'd let it go out of the family, did you ?"

Then he shook hands, and wished John, "Luck in your new job".

§ 3

Another surprise awaited the retiring partner in Carteret and Carteret before he left the office.

"It's just a little souvenir, Sir John", said Joshua Forsdyke, who had been managing clerk years before John took his articles. "We're all very sorry that you should be leaving us."

The inkpot with the facsimile signatures which Forsdyke handed over was massive silver—and he always used a fountain pen. But the thought behind the communal gift touched John to an unwonted sentimentality ; and something of that sentimentality still lingered with him when he walked out into Smith Square.

He felt unwontedly free. His new duties were not to begin till Monday. Tonight, he would not be needed in the House. Tomorrow, he was going to Hurlingham with the Melhuishes. And he'd finished with the law for good.

This last thought proved exhilarating. In future he would be able to concentrate all his energies on the task that most appealed to him. Yet were mere tasks enough for complete happiness ? After all, he was only just forty . . .

Thought dithered a little. His imagination began to work ; turned introspective. Didn't a man of his age need just a little more for complete happiness than his work, his mother and his one son ?

But introspection had never been John's way ; and soon, checking imagination, he looked at his watch, hailed a taxi, and was driven to his garage.

"I brought the car along", he told his mother, when she

stepped out of the train some half an hour later. "We shall need it this afternoon anyway. Why aren't you putting up at Louisa's?"

They kissed. She repeated her telephoned congratulations on his appointment. He repeated his question.

"It didn't seem worth while bothering Louisa just for the one night.

As they followed the porter who had taken her suitcase, it appeared to him that she was unusually distraught. He noticed the book under her arm; took it from her, glanced at the title—"The Epic of The Alcazar. G. McNeill-Moss"—before he helped her into the car.

"Any good?" he asked.

The conventional words seemed to annoy her.

"It's more than good", she snapped. "At least in my opinion. It kept me awake all last night. John—did you realise that they were practically starving before the first week was out, and that they hadn't even enough water to wash a wound?"

He put the book on the back seat of the car. Controlling herself, she went on, "I insist on your reading it, and I'm going to buy a copy for Johnny".

"Why? He's definitely anti-fascist."

"Because he ought to know."

He climbed to his wheel. He asked her where he should drive.

"We'd better drop my bag at the hotel first", she said.

"Then I want to walk over to Harrod's. It's quite close and they've a sale on."

But almost at once she was talking about the book again; and, after a sentence or so, she went on:

"This man Moss doesn't say anything about Maurice. Perhaps he didn't know. I think I'm going to write to him. He seems to have gone out there almost immediately after the relief. He may be able to tell us something about Lina".

"Is that likely?"

She did not answer his question. He grew conscious of the selfcontrol she was practising; respected it. After a while she said, calmly enough:

"I don't feel we ought to miss any chance. It was the last thing Maurice asked us to do. I shall never be quite easy in my mind until we find out what's happened to her. After all, she is one of the family".

Arrived at the hotel, she left him to park the car while she inspected her room. He remembered, vaguely, that she had stayed at this hotel before—but not that Maurice had been with her, because he was thinking of Margery Melhuish once more.

Wouldn't Charlotte consider it a little peculiar that he proposed to watch polo—a game in which he had never taken the slightest interest—with Margery Melhuish instead of accompanying her back to the Manor?

Wasn't it a little peculiar?

"Very", he decided—and his imagination began to work again, making him, in his turn, appear a little distraught to Charlotte when she rejoined him outside the hotel.

§ 4

The ghost of a boy who had once said to her in that very dining room of which she had just caught a passing glimpse, "I'm going absolutely T. T. for the future because I want to keep really fit . . . Won't you be proud of me if I knock up a brace of centuries?" still walked by Charlotte's side as she rejoined her eldest son outside the hotel.

But the distraction she sensed in John drove the ghost away.

"You're looking a bit pensive", she chaffed. "Don't tell me you're feeling the weight of your responsibilities already."

He prevaricated, "As a matter of fact I have had a bit of a shock this morning. After Uncle Herbert and I had signed our agreements he broke some rather extraordinary news to me".

Told the news, his mother did not seem surprised.

"Louisa gave me a pretty good hint", she confessed. "Nearly a year ago. But I couldn't very well pass it on."

They walked at their usual pace, through hot sunshine, to Harrod's. She shopped for an hour and a half, always very polite but always very much the great lady.

"I detest sales", she admitted after she had given her last order.

"Then why patronise them?"

She explained how much she had saved, and delivered a short lecture on "cleaning materials".

"If you had a home to look after——", she began; and once more his imagination worked, making him interrupt, before he had time to consider his words, "That flat of mine isn't much of a home, is it?"

"Dog kennel", remarked Charlotte. "I'm glad you're beginning to recognise it. Shall we lunch here?"

"Wouldn't your hotel be better?"

She hesitated.

"A little dull, don't you think, dear?"

"This place is sure to be packed."

"Take me somewhere else then?"

They adjourned, after further discussion, to the Hyde Park Hotel. It was past two o'clock when they sat down at a table in the grill room. They were at their coffees before he said, "By the way, I hope you won't mind if I don't drive you back tomorrow. I rather want to go to Hurlingham".

"Hurlingham!" Charlotte's eyebrows went up.

"Yes. I hear they've got a couple of rather good matches on."

His nonchalance was rather too well-assumed.

"You might have told me before", said Charlotte. "Then I could have taken a return ticket."

"I'm sorry. I was only invited this morning."

"Who by?"

"That fellow"—not in years had she heard him stammer—"Mer-Melhuish."

"Really."

She asked him for a light. He struck a match and passed it over. Taking the first puff at her cigarette, she wanted to say, "We're only mother and son, not husband and wife".

At this juncture, however—a nicely appropriate word, "juncture"—it did not even seem advisable to remind him that he had already told her Melhuish possessed a sister, "Rather a nice girl. Not a bit modern".

So :

"Don't you think", she asked, "that it's about time you asked for your bill?"

He paid while she was finishing her cigarette.

"I could run up for a few hours on Sunday", he said, as they were leaving.

"I shouldn't bother if I were you. It seems hardly worthwhile."

He admitted that the double journey, especially on Sunday, could be rather tiring. Walking back to the car park, she asked him if he had "any particular holiday plans".

"I don't think I'll go away this year", she went on. "Mother wants to spend three weeks. You may find that rather trying. Why don't you go off *en garçon* for a change?"

"You mean—without either you or Johnny?"

"Oh, you could take Johnny."

The idea seemed to intrigue him. He admitted that perhaps three weeks of "undiluted granny" might be a "bit difficult". A marvellous old lady, though. Over eighty, and still "ruling Hendersons with a rod of iron".

They reached the car park, and started for Harrow. Talk languished while they circled between Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens, made the Bayswater Road, Shepherd's Bush, Western Avenue.

"It doesn't take nearly as long as it used to", said John, revving up once they were outside the thirty mile limit.

And again the ghost of a boy who had once said, "Must I take another pi-jaw? The Head's was bad enough. To hear him talk you'd think I'd put myself absolutely beyond the pale", haunted his mother's mind.

CHAPTER NINETY-SEVEN

§ 1

It was not only the ghost of Maurice that haunted Charlotte as John drove her past the reconstructed "Ducker", swung to his left, swung right again, and changed gear to climb the hill.

Dimly, memory gave her a picture—five and twenty years old now—of this very road, and a woman still in her thirties, walking that narrow pavement under the high wall of rose-red brick.

"How young I was", she thought. "How everything's altered."

For Moss' and Dame Armstrong's had been pulled down to make room for the War Memorial, and the very road, once past "Speecher", seemed unrecognisable. She could scarcely remember what it had looked like—only pillars and an open gate, and flat steps between iron railings . . .

Yet one thing she remembered very clearly—an extraordinary hallucination the mind of that young woman who was herself had conceived, five and twenty years ago, while she stood with her back to Chapel. Then she remembered the tablet they had put up to John's father . . . But it was no use looking back.

§ 2

It was never any use—decided Charlotte—to look back. Her husband, Rupert, Maurice—they were all dead. Life belonged to the living. Only—if the dead laid a task on one, and one failed to accomplish that task, even though it were not one's own fault, even though Lina ought to have let them know her address, ought to have written again . . .

Then a word from John, "There he is", drove out heart-searchings; and momentarily she was herself again, with all ghosts laid.

Johnny, who had been waiting for them at the door of Headmasters, wore the blue jacket and the "greys" of Harrow's post-war weekday. He plucked off his flat straw; and said, "Hallo, you two. You're a bit late".

She knew better than to kiss him here, though he never resented it at the Manor.

"What for?" she asked tartly.

"Tea", said Johnny; and, turning to his father, "You can't leave the bus here. The O.M. doesn't like it. But it'll be all right under the wall."

He helped her out; watched John's parking with a critical eye.

"It can't be too easy with one leg", he remarked. "I always wonder how he managed before they had selfchanging gears."

His assumption of maturity always amused her. Comparing him with John, even with Philip, at the same age, she realised that he really was more mature, and altogether lacking their selfconsciousness. For the latter quality she took some credit; the former she attributed, correctly, to the spirit of the age.

"This is the first time you've been down this term, granny", he went on. "And it's almost over. Have you been ill or something?"

"No. Just slack."

John, not without danger from passing cars, rejoined them. Already the boy was as tall as his father.

"Let's nip along to The Hill", he said.

They followed obediently. He shepherded them across the road and into the school teashop, over which is written, "Stet Fortuna Domus".

"In him", thought Charlotte.

Sentiment touched her. The house of Carteret was fortunate in this tall boy with the fine hands he looked after so carefully, with the athletic shoulders, and the blue eyes, and the brown hair with just the faintest flecks of gold in it, which he always would wear a trifle longer than John approved. His grandfather—he to whom they had put up the tablet in Chapel—would have been proud of this boy. Though he might not have understood him . . .

Johnny seated them at a table near the tiny garden. His laugh dispelled sentiment.

"China for you, granny", he laughed—and his teeth were better than even Philip's had been. "Indian for me and the future Prime Minister."

John said, "Shut up, you young ass, or I'll make you pay for everything you order".

Johnny countered, "All right. If you'll stand me a five instead of the usual end-of-term three. You really ought to make it that, now you're getting six hundred a year instead of four, and a whacking great salary into the bargain".

He ate several cakes, and topped these off with a "dringer" of strawberries, cream, sugar and strawberry ice; halfway through which, he remarked, "Why didn't you bring Margery Melhuish along, pater? You said you were going to".

"She couldn't manage it", said John, with another fine assumption of nonchalance.

Johnny turned to his grandmother, who seemed to be faintly amused.

"You ought to meet Margery", he continued. "She's rather your type. If I weren't a bit keen on the girl myself, I'd try and persuade the pater to marry her. He'll have to marry again now, of course."

"Why, of course?" Charlotte spoke.

"Well"—Johnny's blue eyes twinkled—"don't Prime Ministers have to be married? Baldwin was. Chamberlain is."

John interrupted, still with that fine assumption of nonchalance, "This is the first I've heard of it's being compulsory".

But he changed the conversation rather quickly, saying, "I've a bone to pick with you, young man. It's hardly good manners to call other people 'twirts' just because you don't happen to agree with their politics. The two gentlemen to whom you applied that irreverent term on the telephone this morning are not exactly contemptible, you know. They've accomplished something for their countries".

He explained the allusion to Charlotte. Johnny flushed; but held his ground.

"It's all very well for you", he said. "You're a politician. But I don't see why I shouldn't say what I like about dictators. I do think they're twirts. If a fellow doesn't happen to think the same way they do, they either bump him off or beat him up or shove him in gaol."

The wrangle continued. Listening without comment, Charlotte tried to imagine such an argument between John and his father. "John wouldn't have dared to stand up for his own opinion like Johnny does", she thought. "He would have been frightened to. And as for poking fun at either of us, it would never have crossed his mind".

This comparison between the generations elaborated itself. "Irreverence or over-reverence?" she mused; deciding herself, with very few reservations, on the side of modernity. But then she had always been "modern". She had never believed in the Victorian shibboleths. If she had, her life might have been a little different, at least in one particular . . .

Arrived at which point in her introspections, sentimentality appeared imminent; and she checked thought with a strong hand.

Father and son had reached their usual compromise, John admitting, "I don't like dictatorships any more than you do; but they're a form of government just the same as democracy is"; and Johnny, "I suppose Musso and Hitler have done quite a lot of good to their own people".

John was asking for his bill. She caught Johnny looking at her. His eyes no longer twinkled. They seemed to have grown unduly serious.

"I say, granny——" he began; and stopped.

"Yes, dear."

"I hope you won't be offended——"

He stopped again. She was right. She had never known those eyes cloud before; never known him bashful.

"Why should I be offended?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, there's something I rather want to talk to the pater about. It's rather private. So I was just wondering—I mean——"

"You mean you'd like to be alone with him."

"Well, yes."

He repeated his request to John. She and John exchanged glances.

"It won't take long", pleaded Johnny. "Not more than a quarter of an hour or so. I thought we could go up to my room, if granny didn't mind. She could sit in the Terrace Garden."

"Of course I don't mind", said Charlotte.

Yet somehow the request hurt.

CHAPTER NINETY-EIGHT

§ 1

JOHN and Johnny disappeared into Headmasters. Watching them through the door, Charlotte experienced an overwhelming curiosity. Yet she still felt hurt—and a little afraid.

On second thoughts Johnny had wondered whether it "mightn't be a bit cold for you in the garden", whether she wouldn't be "happier in the Parents' Room. They've papers and things to read. I won't keep the pater long, honestly I won't".

The consideration touched her, yet could not quite still her fear.

She crossed the road, came to the entrance arch of the War Memorial building, stood there for a moment, between the tomb with the golden verses and the names of Harrow's dead.

Automatically she repeated the verses. Automatically she began to read down the names of the dead, till she found: "WHITTINGHAME. R. Captain".

The name of Rupert's regiment, the name of his house, were there, too.

Poor Rupert. Brave Rupert. Maurice also had come to his death "through battle flame". Like father, like son!

It was in her to weep. But she passed on, tearless, up the great staircase. Again automatically, her feet took her towards the room which another mother has given to Harrow that her boy's name may not be forgotten.

She entered the lovely panelled room.

Light glowed over the boy's picture, set in the oak. His candid eyes seemed to be looking straight at her. He wore uniform. He had red hair. Her own dead son's hair had been flaxen. Like his father's.

Her own son—by Rupert. She had always done her best

for him. But in one task—the last, the easiest—she had failed.

Still tearless, she made her way out of the Fitch Room into the Parents' Room, which happened to be empty; sat down to wait for John and Johnny. As far as Johnny was concerned—instinct told her—there was no reason to be afraid. As far as Maurice was concerned, that fear also had been banished—and forever—by his death.

The hardness, the disloyalty, of this last thought shamed all her emotions; yet her intellect would not deny it.

"While he was alive", said her intellect, "you were never quite sure that he might not do something disgraceful. You were always a little afraid somebody might find out *your* secret. And you were never as fond of him as you were of the others."

But, on that, intellect failed and emotions gained full sway.

Frantically she told herself that her love for Maurice had been as strong as her love for John, for Philip, for Elizabeth. Fanatically she assured herself that Maurice's love for Lina, his fight to save Lina, outweighed all his trivial failings; and that he had died like a hero, battling for a cause he believed just.

"He must have believed it just", she assured herself. Or had he only fought for the love of fighting, like his father?

Perhaps.

The possibility distressed her. Her mind switched to Rupert again. Secretly it fell to comparing him, and her son by him, with the man who had been her husband.

The better man, her husband. If only he were still alive. If only she had never been unfaithful to him.

"Still more sentimentality", her intellect tried to comfort her; but regret for that one infidelity still dominated all the welter of emotions through which she was secretly passing, when John appeared, saying:

"Sorry to have been so long, mother. Johnny had some work to do. He sent you his love. We'd better be off I think".

"Was it anything very serious?" she asked.

John smiled, "He thought so".

"Are you allowed to tell me about it?"

"I'd rather not go into details."

"Can you give me a hint?"

"Easily. The clue is 'a present-day obsession'. It's a word of three letters beginning with S."

"And ending with X."

"Precisely."

When they were halfway to London John, who had been talking generalities, broke off to add, "Some of Johnny's questions were rather awkward. But I fancy I dealt with them competently. He's a good lad; and as clean as a hound's tooth. It's grand to think that he doesn't keep any secrets from me".

"Let's hope he never will", said Charlotte.

But again she experienced a hurt.

§ 2

The ensuing hours did much to alleviate Charlotte's hurt.

John gave her dinner at one of his clubs. He had booked seats for *Judgment Day*. Afterwards he insisted on supper, over which they discussed the play with mutual enthusiasm.

"I don't know why I'm always fussing these days", she thought as he kissed her good night.

All the same, she slept vilely; and was glad when the train took her out of town.

John, always dutiful, had escorted her to the station—and insisted on buying her a first-class ticket, "Just to make up for my remissness in leaving you all alone this week end". Usually—the habits of economy acquired just after the war persisting—she travelled third.

The compartment was empty. She had not quite finished *The Epic of The Alcazar*. Some phrases towards the end caught her attention.

"One of the largest stairways in the world . . . Enclosed in a hall, of the whole height and width of the Alcazar. . . . It had immensity, but yet brought a sense of frustration . . . Having started with these giant steps, it broke into two flights, each of which ended . . . at a blank wall,"

A blank wall!

She put down the book ; and began to meditate. Hurt returned. Johnny didn't need her mothering any more. As a confidant for the troubles of adolescence, he chose his father.

Naturally enough ! She couldn't blame Johnny for that—any more than she could blame John for preferring Hurlingham with the Melhuish girl to the Manor with herself and Laura. She had always wanted John to marry again. All the same . . .

"All the same", she meditated, "I look like being rather a lonely old woman." And for a while she gave way to self-pity, thinking how much she had done for John and Johnny, each of whom—manlike—would eventually go his own separate way.

But selfpity had rarely been her way ; and telling herself, "They've given you just as much as you've given them", she abandoned it, picking up the book once more, re-studying the illustrations after she had come to the end of the text.

Next, she looked out of the window for a while ; tried to imagine herself riding this or that piece of country.

"Why does summer always go so slowly?" she thought ; and scoffed at herself for a, "Mere fox-hunting woman—the sort you see on the stage".

On which she found herself inquiring, "Why can't you ride straight at this thing ? Why can't you admit the truth—that you've never been right with yourself since Maurice was killed?"

For of course that was the truth. Unless truth went even deeper . . . Unless Maurice's death had merely crystallised this sense of—what was the word Moss had used?—frustration.

But the word only set her scoffing again. Frustration indeed. The blank wall, forsooth. When had she failed to get what she wanted ? Except this once. And it wasn't her fault if Maurice's wife hadn't enough sense—if she were too proud—to demand assistance.

"Probably found herself another man", decided a last hardness in Charlotte. "Shan't worry about her any more. Shan't worry about anything any more. Got my own life to live. What's left of it anyway."

In that mood she stepped out of the train.

§ 3

On the platform at Laxford Junction Charlotte encountered Joan Maythorn and the Willoughbys. Horatio was at his friendliest.

"Had no idea you were on this train, Lady C.", he boomed. "Pity. We might have travelled down together. Great news about your son. Hope we'll see something of him before we go to Deauville."

They went off to their car. Joan Maythorn said, "Snob. Why first class? I saw you get in—and out. What are you doing in the train anyway? I thought John was driving you back".

"I'm a grass mother this week end", smiled Charlotte.

"Then how about taking pot luck with us this evening?"

"I'd rather make it lunch on Sunday."

"You're probably right. Pot luck with us usually means tinned salmon. What wouldn't I give for a Mrs. Baldock!"

They gossiped away a few moments; separated outside the station. Twenty minutes later Charlotte had driven herself through her own lodge gates and handed over the car to her new "chauffeur"—a raw boy from the village, just fitted with his livery and only just free of his "L".

"I'm afraid Tom isn't going to be much good", grumbled Laura, who had been sewing on the terrace. "We nearly had an accident yesterday afternoon."

"Did he hit anything?"

"No."

"Then it wasn't an accident. Any other news?"

"Yes. The vicar's ill. He won't be able to preach tomorrow."

"Is he going to die on us?"

"Good heavens, no. What makes you say that? He's only got a sore throat."

"Would that it were a chronic infliction. Where are the dogs?"

"They were such a nuisance I had them shut up. Shall I go and let them out again?"

"Please."

Laura departed. Sanders, her new butler—who had been with her a year now, ever since John insisted, much against his own wishes, on pensioning-off Simeon—emerged for Charlotte's suitcase. She was not at all sure that she liked Sanders. He "m'ladies" one too much.

"A lady telephoned just after breakfast, m'lady", he told her now. "She wanted to know whether you were at home, m'lady. I informed her you were expected today, m'lady . . . No. She did not give her name, m'lady."

Sanders, also, departed. Johnny's labrador, her own two cockers, flung themselves across the terrace at her. Commanding them, "Down, you pests. Down! Manners", she realised that it was only during this last year, only since Maurice's death, that she had learned to appreciate the companionship of dogs.

§ 4

The three dogs followed Charlotte into the house and up to her bedroom. Kate had left—to be married, if you please—hardly decent at her age—just before Simeon. Ellen was gone, too. Of her pre-war staff, none remained. Her new girls were no less obliging, very much better educated, at least equally efficient. But . . .

"But I miss the old faces", she brooded. "Kate and Ellen were with me before the children grew up. They were part of the family."

More sentimentality. She wouldn't give way to it. She simply would not give way to it. Missing the old faces. Rubbish. She had one old face to look at anyway. Laura's.

Laura—the last of the slaves!

They lunched together—Sanders over-attentive with his, "Roast lamb, m'lady. Black currant tart, m'lady" (Did the man care if she were alive or dead?)—the dogs obedient but with their ears cocked, their paws coaxing for tit-bits.

Did they care either? Did Laura? Did anybody? Only up to the point of their own interests. Look at it any way one liked, living—for a mother of sixty—was a lonely job.

Lunch over, she told Laura to go and lie down.

"I shall be out till tea time", she said; and, taking a stick

from the hall stand, whistling the three dogs to follow her, went out across the bridge.

Her mind seemed to clear as she climbed for the Fort. She really must—what was Johnny's word?—snap out of these depressions. She had so much for which to be thankful. Her troubles were such little ones. Obviously, a boy rising sixteen should confide in his father rather than in his grandmother. Obviously, John couldn't get married again without a preliminary courtship. And Philip was so happy in his marriage, Elizabeth was so happy in her marriage. All the same . . .

"All the same", decided Charlotte, "I'm not happy. And I never shall be until I know what's happened to that poor girl."

Reaching the Fort, she sat for a while, her dogs panting at her feet. They wanted water. There was none in this fort. There had been hardly any in that other, the one Maurice had defended with his life, the one from which he had written his last message, charging them to take care of "my Lina" . . .

"There you go again", she upbraided herself; and rose, and continued her walk.

Presently, frisking down the other side of the hill between the grass-grown ramparts, the dogs found a little stream, and drank greedily. Presently—taking a footpath through a cover which had once been her own—she had to call them to heel.

"A doggy woman", she caught herself thinking. "A fox-hunting woman. But what else? Merely a mother whose children don't need her any more, a housekeeper with an empty house."

She emerged from the shadows of the little wood into golden sunshine. Again, as she climbed, her mind seemed to clear. Soon she was looking down on the house, thinking:

"John will be here more often now he only has his parliamentary work. If he marries again, he'll bring his wife with him. He may have more children. One day, this house will be Johnny's".

But by then—according to all human probability—she would be dead.

The casual thought seemed to bring back all her depression. She would be so very dead. Just a memory in a few minds. Like her husband. Like her lover. Like Maurice . . .

There she went again. She must keep her mind off Maurice. She *must* snap out of these depressions.

"Come along, doggies", she called; and ran a few yards, out of sheer bravado, just to show herself how very far she was from being dead yet, down the hill towards home covers.

Just as she rounded the covers, she saw Sanders on the bridge.

§ 5

Vaguely, as the last dip in the turf hid him from her, Charlotte wondered what Sanders could be doing outside the house when he should have been getting tea ready.

"He knows I'm never unpunctual", she thought. Then he was coming down the slope to her, m'ladying her again:

"It's the lady who telephoned, m'lady. I wasn't sure whether you would wish to receive her, m'lady. So I asked her to wait in the hall until I ascertained whether you had returned, m'lady".

"Didn't she give you her name, Sanders?"

"Why, yes, m'lady. She said"—Sanders' tone implied complete disbelief—"that she was Mrs. Carteret, m'lady."

"Mrs. Maurice Carteret?"

"Yes, m'lady."

"You damn fool", Charlotte wanted to say. "Leaving her to stand about as though she were a stranger." And only self-control prevented her from saying that, from running again.

"Lina", her mind shouted to her. "At last."

CHAPTER NINETY-NINE

§ 1

CROSSING the bridge into the house—she had walked the few yards so quickly that Sanders was three good paces behind her—Charlotte stopped to inquire :

“Is Miss Marston down yet?”

“I fancy not, m'lady.”

“Then please ask her to oblige me by having tea in her own room.”

The words sounded so ridiculously stiff, so absurdly old-fashioned, that she could have laughed at herself for them. She could have laughed at this solemn-faced young butler, too, for his, “Very good, m'lady. Shall I bring your own tea to the Gallery or would you prefer it in the morning room, m'lady?”

But this sudden urge to merriment—she realised—sprang solely from this sudden feeling of relief. Lina was here. In the house. One would be able to do what Maurice wanted . . .

“The morning room”, she said, controlling herself again ; and hesitated a last moment, thinking, “I suppose she's hard up. I expect she's come for money. Well, goodness knows I shan't grudge it her”.

Then, her dogs following, she entered the hall with a set smile on her lips, hand of welcome, speech of welcome both ready.

It was Lina, however, who spoke first.

“I was afraid you might have a little difficulty in recognising me”, she said, while Charlotte still stared.

§ 2

The hand Maurice's widow offered was scrupulously clean, but work-roughened, the unvarnished nails cut square.

Taking it, Charlotte realised that this woman used neither paint nor powder, that her long plainly done hair had lost its lustre, that she was dressed as cheaply as possible, in the simplest black, and that she wore no jewellery . . . except the cross.

Perhaps she had stared too hard at the cross. For Lina's other hand—on which she wore no wedding ring—was fingering it.

"I was told to come", went on Lina.

Their hands parted.

"I'm very glad you did", said Charlotte ; and, thinking how banal the question sounded, "How did you get here?"

"I took the train from London to Laxford. Then an omnibus to the village. From there I walked. It's such a beautiful walk. I enjoyed it tremendously."

"You'll have some tea?" (Another banality !)

"I should like that very much."

As they went towards the morning room, Charlotte recollected how flamboyantly lovely this woman had been, how Maurice had painted her, all in white against scarlet and golden draperies. Unconsciously Lina took that very pose when she seated herself—and something of the loveliness seemed to come back.

"I am a little tired", she admitted, in answer to yet another banal question. "You see, I have been travelling ever since Monday."

"May one ask where from?"

"From Seville. I am in the convent of a nursing order. But only as a postulant. It was my father confessor who told me that I should come to you."

Sanders, bringing in tea, interrupted her.

"I'll ring when I want you to clear away", said Charlotte. "Take the dogs with you please."

Sanders m'ladied her and went out.

"The holy father said I should have come sooner", continued Lina. "He said that you had a right to know . . . everything."

Her eyes had not changed. They were the very eyes of the picture.

"I should like to", said Charlotte.

She poured tea. Lina drank one cup. She offered food; but Lina would not eat.

"Please let me tell you now", she begged. "I can't stay very long. The omnibus goes back at seven o'clock, and it will take me nearly an hour to walk to the village."

Tact prevented Charlotte from saying more than, "Go on, my dear".

Lina shifted her pose; leaned forward, fingering the cross once more.

"Maurice never told you", she began, "that I took to the drug again; that I stole his money—the money you sent for our holiday—to buy it. We should not have gone to Toledo otherwise. He thought I should be safe there. If we had never gone to Toledo, he would be alive now."

For a moment Charlotte was aware of anger. "Then you killed him", she wanted to say. But already Lina was going on, "You will blame me for that, of course. I was altogether to blame. I should never have married him"; and anger died.

"I don't blame you", she heard herself whisper. "Tell me the rest. All of it."

"All of it", repeated Lina; and after that she talked for the best part of an hour.

§ 3

Twice, towards the end of that hour, Charlotte broke in with questions.

Each time Lina seemed to hesitate.

"No", said Lina. "He was not killed outright."

"Yes", said Lina, "I am afraid he did have some pain. You see, they had to operate—twice—and there were no anæsthetics."

Charlotte shuddered. She knew that, of course. Actually, since reading the book, she knew much more about the details of the siege than this woman, who must have lived underground all the time, whom shell-fire must have dazed, whom hunger and thirst must have exhausted, whose memories seemed to be all of the one man.

"But Maurice never complained", said this woman. "He never lost his courage, not even when the last mine exploded. He was so wonderful, always."

There she hesitated a while, as though groping for a decision, before she continued :

"The doctors did all they could. But God was wiser than they. God knew it was better Maurice should not live. He had . . . lost his sight, you see".

And after that she said, very simply :

"Maurice only knew he was blind a few moments before he died. So he had no time to be unhappy about it. I think that is all I have to tell you except one thing".

"And that thing?" asked Charlotte.

Once again Lina hesitated, once again she seemed to be groping for decision.

"It may not comfort *you*", she said at last ; and it seemed to Charlotte that her eyes grew even more lovely. "I don't want to pretend that it comforted him. He thought it hadn't done any good. He thought he hadn't begun to believe soon enough. But . . . your Maurice found salvation before he died. He told me so. He told me that he had crossed himself. That comforts me, always.

"Always", repeated Lina.

Just before she went—on foot, despite all Charlotte's pleading, "At least, let me have you driven as far as Laxford"—she said, without the least trace of selfconsciousness :

"It was through your Maurice that I came to God. He saved my soul. Even if your Maurice had not himself found God before he died—and I know he did—all his sins would have been forgiven him".

"His sins", thought Charlotte, taking that work-worn hand for the last time, "or mine?"

§ 4

That last thought troubled Charlotte Carteret, many thoughts troubled her, as she stood alone on the terrace, watching Lina's black figure make its slow way past the shining lake. Yet under every troublesome thought lay a mite of comfort, a scrap of understanding, the beginnings of a peace.

Presently—all alone now, with Lina's figure dwindled away through the lodge gates—she began to understand how long it was since she had been really at peace.

"Never since I gave myself to Rupert", she realised. "The knowledge of my sin was always there, hurting me."

That knowledge hurt still. It would always hurt. But only a little. Only so very little. So much less than she deserved.

"I've been lucky", she caught herself thinking. "I've escaped punishment. In this world anyway. Is there another? John, my husband, thought so. He used to go to church every Sunday, even on board ship, even in America. Perhaps he was right. Perhaps Lina is right."

But her creed could never be Lina's. She could not even acknowledge that more liberal creed which had been her husband's. Why?

The question defied answer. She asked herself another: "Do you believe in an after life?" Her emotions replied, "Try to. It makes everything so much easier". Her intellect countered, "The easy way is never the right way".

She asked herself the obvious third question: "Do you believe in God?" Intellect and emotions answered simultaneously, "We believe in a Power. But we don't know whether it's personal or impersonal. We call it Conscience. Listen to this power. Listen to the voice of your conscience".

The voice began to speak. But it used no words. It seemed to speak for many lifetimes. But time—as men and women count it—scarcely passed.

Charlotte knew this because the shadow on the dial by which she was standing had not moved. She knew this because the lake still shone, and because the sun still hung stationary over King's Oak Hill.

Then the voice of her conscience ceased, and the sun seemed to go out, and she knew that she was crying.

It seemed so ridiculous to be crying.

For whom was she crying?

Not for her dead lover. Not for her dead son.

For her dead husband perhaps?

Or just because she was a mother?

"I suppose that's the real reason", she thought. "I suppose all mothers cry sometimes."

Sentimentality once more !

Or just sentiment ?

Could one live without sentiment ?

"Of course", said her intellect.

"Of course not", said her emotions.

She asked herself a final question, "What of the future ?"

Conscience answered, and at last the words seemed audible :

"That must take care of itself. You're no age. You're only sixty. You've always ridden your own line. So you must go on riding your own line—up to heaven's gates if there are any. You'll know that for certain one day. Meanwhile, don't bother about it. Just do the best you can—and stop snivelling".

So Charlotte Carteret dried her eyes and squared her shoulders and walked back into the house.

THE END

